

Gaslit Nation Transcript

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Art Matters: The Nelson George Interview

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Andrea Chalupa:

Welcome to Gaslit Nation. I am your host, Andrea Chalupa. We talk a lot on this show about making art and the power of art. This special discussion is about artists. It's for people who want to be artists. It's for artists at all stages of their careers. It's for people who love and consume art. It's a discussion about the value of mentorship as well and why that's important to the whole process of creating art.

Andrea Chalupa:

The way to get to the heart of being an artist, why that's important, what that means, the practical ins and outs of how to do it, we're going to talk to an artist who believed in me very early on, and that alone helped me learn how to take myself seriously as an artist and bring that out to the world. Here's artist mentorship one-on-one with Gaslit Nation and our very special guest, my longtime friend and mentor, Nelson George.

Nelson George:

Thank you for having me.

Andrea Chalupa:

Nelson George is the author of several histories of African-American music, including *Where Did Our Love Go*, *The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, *The Death Of Rhythm and Blues*, and the classic, *Hip Hop America*. He has published two collections of music journalism; *Buppies*, *B-Boys*, *Baps & Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black America*, and the recent, the *Nelson George Mixtape*, which is available through Pacific Books.

Andrea Chalupa:

You have to sign my copy before you leave.

Nelson George:

There you go.

Andrea Chalupa:

He has written several novels with music themes; *The Accidental Hunter*, *The Plot Against Hip Hop*, *The Lost Treasures of R&B*, and *To Funk and Die in LA*. In television, George was a producer on the Emmy Award-winning *The Chris Rock Show* on HBO, a producer on *Hip Hop Honors* on VH1, and executive producer of the *American Gangster* crime series on BET. He's no stranger to the themes here on Gaslit Nation.

Andrea Chalupa:

As a filmmaker, George has co-written the screenplays to *Strictly Business* and *CB4*. He directed Queen Latifah to a Golden Globe win in the HBO film, *Life Support*, which he also co-wrote. He has directed a number of documentaries, including *Finding the Funk*, *The Announcement*, and *Brooklyn Boheme*.

Andrea Chalupa:

Nelson was a producer on the award winning documentary on Black music executive Clarence Avant, *The Black Godfather* for Netflix. His theatrical documentary on the ballerina Misty Copeland is a must watch film—especially for children—called *A Ballerina's Tale*. He was a writer and producer on Baz Luhrmann's hip hop-inspired Netflix series, *The Get Down*, and was also an advisor on an upcoming Elvis project by Baz Luhrmann.

Andrea Chalupa:

Currently, he's working as an executive producer on a documentary series about Tupac Shakur being directed by Allen Hughes. To add to this illustrious biography, Nelson has been helping me for a million years navigate the wily world of getting *Mr. Jones* written and produced. That's now a very important footnote to your biography, I must say.

Nelson George:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. It was good.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah.

Nelson George:

You got that done, baby.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yep, yep, yep.

Nelson George:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

If you see *Mr. Jones* and the fact that Gareth has a camera in Ukraine, which he didn't historically on that trip, that was Nelson saying, "Give him a camera." Now there's a camera in that film. It's the poster of the film.

Nelson George:

That's right. That's so exciting.

Andrea Chalupa:

Nelson and I met in New York in the summer of 2002. This was the first summer after 9/11 when New York, like now, was coming out of trauma and grappling for meaning. We met at Sounds of Brazil. It was at a Cody Chesnutt concert.

Nelson George:

Good memory.

Andrea Chalupa:

You and I were some of the few people actually watching the artists on stage. Everyone else was busy networking because it was an industry showcase event or something like that. I had no idea who you were. You were writing into a reporter's notepad. So I, being the firecracker that I am, came up to you and said, "Are you a writer? I want to be a writer. How do you become a writer, duh, duh, duh?" The rest is history. Here we are.

Nelson George:

Well, I'll tell you something funny. That same story is how I met my mentor.

Andrea Chalupa:

Are you serious?

Nelson George:

Yeah. There's a guy named Robert "Rocky" Ford, who died a year ago during the pandemic. I was at the Beacon Theater. I'm saying '76, '77, I was a sophomore in college. You're at the Beacon Theater, Grand Central Station, great funk band is playing. There's all these people dancing. There's one guy five rows in front of me writing in a notepad. I said, "Got to be a music writer." I followed him out after the show.

Andrea Chalupa:

Oh, my God.

Nelson George:

I said, "I'm a college student. I have these clips from my college newspaper." I sent them to him. He read them. Thought I had promised and he brought me in. That's when I became a mascot of Billboard, and I started reviewing. The two areas that were really wide open, disco and heavy metal. I wrote for the disco section. I went to gay discos and reviewed First Choice.

Nelson George:

I also remember vividly being assigned to review Ted Nugent at Madison Square Garden with AC/DC opening. You can't imagine how loud that was. That was the beginning of my career, was basically seeing someone with a notepad and following them out. There you go.

Andrea Chalupa:

It's the circle of life.

Nelson George:

There you go. Absolutely.

Andrea Chalupa:

You took me seriously, because you could have been like, "Buzz, scam." But you're like, "All right. You got to repay it."

Nelson George:

But people... it's a vibe thing.

Andrea Chalupa:

Your experience coming up as a young unknown in Fort Greene, Brooklyn with all these other young unknowns, like Spike Lee, the Marsalis brothers, Laurence Fishburne. Who else was there? There was ...

Nelson George:

Jesus, I mean, who wasn't? I mean, from Vernon Reid, there is a whole world of, Geri Allen, great jazz musicians. Wesley Snipes had a big brownstone in the neighborhood. God, I mean ...

Andrea Chalupa:

Rosie Perez?

Nelson George:

Wendell Pierce. I mean, I can go on. I mean, in Brooklyn Boheme, we only had about 11 out of probably we could have had another 200 people. There were that many... maybe Saul Williams.

Andrea Chalupa:

Erykah Badu.

Nelson George:

Erykah Badu, Common.

Andrea Chalupa:

So, it was like 1920s Paris beset in Fort Greene, Brooklyn.

Nelson George:

It really was interesting. Because I mean, I would say, I moved into the neighborhood in '85. It was already percolating. Then Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*, because a lot of it was shot in the neighborhood. Suddenly, people start hanging out there more. Spike gives really good parties, more people coming. "Oh, this is a cool area." It begins to percolate.

Nelson George:

Then you had the poetry thing. There was a spot called the "Brooklyn Moon". Out of that one spot, Erykah Badu did "Bag Lady" there. Saul Williams started his career there. There were several waves of people who came through the neighborhood. I would say it probably peaked out around 1999, 2000. So, there was a good 15-year run.

Andrea Chalupa:

I think what's important for people to know is that Spike Lee, who is synonymous with Brooklyn, his first big feature film launched the independent film industry in America.

Nelson George:

Independent film, but it also launched the neighborhood and it was an inspiration. Okay. Okay. I'll tell you. For example, *She's Gotta Have It* opened on 66th and Broadway, which was a really cool indie theater. It's the same place you'd see *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. When the movie opened, there was a line outside, I mean, nothing but Black people in their 20s and 30s up and around the corner.

Nelson George:

Spike would be out there giving out buttons, and, "Hey, I'm Spike Lee." He was really working the crowd. It felt like a generational coming of age. At one point, I forget when he had the party, but there was a screening of *She's Gotta Have It*, and it was a party at the Puck building. The party he had there, everybody from Reggie Hudlin, who was coming out of Harvard University and wanted to make movies, Fab Five Freddy, athletes, writers. It was just this thing that was ... It felt like, "Oh, this is our moment."

Nelson George:

Because *She's Gotta Have It* had the Buppy, had the B-Boy, had the Bohemian girl, had all these different types that were, in a way, new kinds of types of Black people, certainly ones that were very endemic to New York at that time. We all could see ourselves as one of those people. It felt like us, a new ... our generation. All of us saw potential. A guy we know who lives in a little apartment off DeKalb Avenue just made a movie that's in fucking theaters.

Nelson George:

That was a big generational sense of, "we can do this". Suddenly you see *Hollywood Shuffle*, you see all these other movies are coming out. But Spike is the big bang of possibility. Also, as you said, it was a big bang of possibility for young Black filmmakers, but also for women filmmakers, and lesbian filmmakers. It was this idea. Because all of these people who've been outside and even American indie film got to remember, American indie film was still very White and it remained White for a long time.

Nelson George:

You think about the typical Sundance film with some White guy in the suburbs trying to figure out his angst-ridden life. That was like every fucking movie at Sundance.

Andrea Chalupa:

And that's who programs the festivals.

Nelson George:

As well. Those movies... and it was a self-reflective thing. Who financed the movies with that guy? Spike's movie was a big blow. I worked with him actually on a book, *Spike Lee's Gotta Have It*, which I did the intro to. There's a long Q&A with me and Spike in it. That book was taught at universities for years as an inspiration for indie young filmmakers. What's interesting ... I'll tell you the great story of how I saw *She's Gotta Have It* because it's very emblematic.

Nelson George:

Fort Greene at that time, now, everything's \$3,4 and 5 million brownstones. That time it was empty brownstones. It was really going down in the '70s. It had been gang-ridden. Between me and Spike was a

place called Myrtle Avenue. Back then it was called Murder Myrtle. He lived on the other side of Myrtle. So I go to his apartment. It's not even in the house. It's the garage in the back of the house.

Nelson George:

All that's in there is a bed, a giant poster of Michael Jordan, LaserDisc player—which was, you know, if you're a filmmaker back then LaserDisc was the official format—and a giant Steenbeck editing machine, which no one has seen in years. But back then... so, he literally had these big reels of film. He lines them up. The first time I see *She's Gotta Have It* was on this editing machine in his apartment.

Nelson George:

Like I said, I had never seen anything like it. I'd never seen what I consider contemporary, young Black New York. Nola Darling was ... She was a graphic artist. She had an interesting haircut. She was kind of a free spirit. Those are the girls who lived in the neighborhood. She was very much like the other women we'd meet in Fort Greene.

Andrea Chalupa:

She's the subject of *She's Gotta Have It*.

Nelson George:

Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. It's from her point of view, ultimately. She has three lovers. Each Lover represents in a way a different strata of Black life. There's Mars Blackmon, which Spike played, one of the first B-Boys, that bike culture, baseball cap or biker hat, one of the first ones on film.

Andrea Chalupa:

What does that represent?

Nelson George:

It just represented this kind of emerging street character. He was a hustler, I guess, in his way. But he was a bike messenger, just a real urban type listening to hip hop, talked real fast, had a lot of new slang that was everywhere in the streets of New York. Then there's Greer Childs who's sort of this really buppy. The buppy was the Black yuppie, he's the aspirational, "I want to go to Sag Harbor and had a house in Sag Harbor. I got a good corporate job."

Nelson George:

"I'm the Black guy who's benefiting the civil rights movement. But I also feel very entitled."

Andrea Chalupa:

The neoliberal?

Nelson George:

Yes. Then there's Jamie who's your everyman. He's Southern. You can tell he came from down South. He's got good values, a little boring, but solid. Then there's also another ... it was a young female lesbian character and there's Spike's sister who's a bohemian woman who plays a cello. All of these are very recognizable. They weren't recognizable in a Hollywood movie. They were recognizable when you went out and walked through the streets of the city. So Spike made a movie about us.

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Nelson George:

That impact of Spike rippled out and what Spike made clear is that we could take our reality and make it into books and movies and TV shows. There was a route that hadn't been there before. Also Spike parallels hip hop's growth. Spike himself, interesting enough, loves hip hop, but he loves so much other stuff. He came from a jazz family. He wasn't like, "I'm just into hip hop. I'm into Black culture in all those different ways."

Nelson George:

But the hip hop thing also was a sense of I can tell my own story. The Black independent film movement starts with Spike and Robert Townsend, and then it goes into John Singleton, and so forth, and Hughes brothers. That's one track. Then you have hip hop, which is emerging in the late '80s, its kind of "golden age," into the beginnings of West Coast rap.

Nelson George:

You have these two things, and they're telling narratives from Black point of view and they're creating stars.

Andrea Chalupa:

What it did was it turned Brooklyn into a brand.

Nelson George:

The Brooklyn we know now, in many ways, begins with Spike, because the narrative around Brooklyn before that, you know, the Dodgers had left in the '50s. By the '70s, it was like you couldn't get a taxi to Brooklyn. Actually, Spike even did a funny little short film for Saturday Night Live about trying to get a taxi back to Brooklyn. It was a joke, but it was also about, you couldn't get anyone to take you over the damn bridge back home if you went out late at night.

Nelson George:

Brooklyn did become a no-zone, and it become that thing. Unless you went to Brooklyn Heights and hung out with Truman Capote, it wasn't a place to go to. *She's Gotta Have It* and Spike's Brooklyn centricness, because his third film is *Do the Right Thing*. Then throughout *Crooklyn*, and *Mo' Better Blues*, Brooklyn is a character in almost all his early films, probably except for maybe *School Daze*.

Nelson George:

He helped make Brooklyn cool. Fort Greene then becomes this place where ...

Andrea Chalupa:

Of charter schools.

Nelson George:

Now. But it was just basically ... There weren't many restaurants. There was a Key Foods which you avoided like the plague if you didn't want to die, because the meat was terrible. But there were house parties and there were barbecues. Some of my best memories of the era are house parties. You can go to a party and there's Larry Fishburne—or Laurence Fishburne, as he would have you now. There'd be Lisa Jones, a fantastic writer for *The Voice*.

Nelson George:

Also, there was a very strong lesbian community with a couple of bars. It was a lot going on. The music was going on with the big jazz scene—avant-garde jazz—and then later on Branford and Wynton move over. Wynton doesn't like Brooklyn because it didn't stay open that late at that time and all it was, was takeout Chinese. He left, but Branford stayed there. Branford becomes an actor through Spike.

Nelson George:

Branford does film scoring. If you look at the score from *Mo' Better Blues*, that's very much this idea of cool hip hop, cool jazz all happening at the same time, which, it was happening all at the same time in Fort Greene and Clinton Hill. You could really walk out your door and run into Common, Erykah Badu, Saul Williams, Toray, Chris Rock.

Nelson George:

There was also the sense that there was so much going on that for all of the parties and all the socializing, people were getting stuff done. There's an incredible amount of creativity that came out. There's nothing like the proximity to other people doing good stuff. I look back now, I remember in 1990, the *Times* was going to do a big cover story on the new Black Renaissance, they called it.

Nelson George:

I remember at the time thinking, "Well, it's cool. But there wasn't enough work being done. I don't think enough work could come out." But now we can go back 20, 30 years now and say, "Look at all these movies. Look at all these actors. Look at all these records. Look at all these books." and really quantify that as an incredible time. When I did the documentary, *Brooklyn Boheme*, we were at the crux. I knew it was turning, and I wanted to get it while I could because I feel like now it's really ancient history.

Nelson George:

Fort Greene means something completely different than it did, than what Spike created there. There's all this thing where people, every time ... They're always predicting people are leaving New York. No. They don't leave New York. A lot of them came to Brooklyn. If you were someone who didn't want to live in Manhattan, but you still want to stash in New York, suddenly you look over at these brownstones and like, "Wow."

Nelson George:

The point of New York, it's all about real estate. The fact is that people always go to, "South Bronx was fucked up." You guys never saw the Lower East Side. Look at any videos of Basquiat walking around, that bombed out area is not the Bronx, it's Manhattan. All the different clubs, the Mudd Club and all that supported that art/music/performance scene was all predicated on cheap real estate for artists and cheap rents for clubs.

Andrea Chalupa:

Do you think that's going to come back now, now that the pandemic has emptied out some parts in New York?

Nelson George:

Well, the parts in New York that've been emptied out, we'll be getting to see. Midtown Manhattan is going to be interesting. The theater is going to open up in September. That will definitely bring back the tourists. I think people are going to want to come back. I mean, there's already a lot of tourists here now. But the office buildings all along 6th Avenue, 5th Avenue, all those high rises, there's a skeleton crew of people in there.

Nelson George:

I just did a piece. I did an interview with somebody at a building on 42nd Street. I think at the time it's owned by Squarespace. I asked how many people are in the office on this floor? They said, "Well, seems like there's only two people a day who go in." What are we going to do once the winter comes? We see that really people aren't coming, but not in the big ... I don't think we're ever going to have all those buildings full again.

Nelson George:

People are still building new high rises. There's still a lot of construction going on. Can we repurpose those buildings for homeless shelters or low income housing? The difference is when Soho got converted, when Williamsburg gets converted, all those places were based on primarily pre-war houses, or a sturdy construction. It's all these, you know, factories and these old brownstones. They have great bones and then you build new buildings around them.

Nelson George:

Midtown is just all skyscrapers. Even as a person who's looking for affordable housing, do you want to live on 47th Street in a 60-story building? It's going to be an awkward conversion. Do we tear those down at some point, because they're not financially feasible anymore? It's a radical, radical... and that's downtown LA. We spent so much time, so funny, getting people to come back to cities. That was a big mantra of the '90s into the early aughts, right?

Nelson George:

It worked. Now what do you do with all these big buildings? I don't know. I mean, maybe that's the futurist job, but I'm not quite sure it's the same revival job as you have with these other lower building, old school neighborhoods that were easily ... You could look at Soho and see, "Oh, wood floors." You see all of these different bones that look really cool that you could fix up.

Andrea Chalupa:

No one wants to fix up Midtown.

Nelson George:

No. That's going to be interesting to see what happens. I've seen the same thing, I was in San Francisco recently, along Market Street, where Squarespace has this fucking gargantuan building there and there's all these skyscrapers. Who's going back into those ... especially the tech companies who are already predicated on mobility, are they going to move all those people back into these buildings now?

Andrea Chalupa:

Turn them into gardens for the deer to graze through. It's true, though. It's like community breeds art movements, and they feed off each other. But in terms of looking back now, so practical advice for artists, what were some of the X factors that determined who made it, and who didn't?

Nelson George:

A lot of it has to do with respect for the art form. The guys and gals who made it who I see still working, that I've known since the '80s and '90s, are those who understood the history of what they were doing. They weren't going on, "I'm reinventing the game." Whether it was a hip hop DJ who really knew the history of music and how to find the right samples, to the comedian who went back and listened to

Lenny Bruce and Bill Cosby and all those different things and studied their technique and prior, longevity is based on a foundation of quality.

Nelson George:

You have to understand what good is. You have to have a standard of what good is or great is. To be good is a minimum requirement. To be great is the next level. But you can only do that through study and meditation. I mean, I really believe that. Everyone I know who's gone on to have enduring careers is a student of something. The folks who didn't make it were those who thought it was all about them, and all about their moment.

Nelson George:

It's like running into the old MC who's still telling you about the record they made in '83. You're like, "Well, that was a great record. But did you evolve out of that? What was your foundation?" I think that's one of the fundamentals, is understanding the craft, the history of your craft. A good example: Chris Rock is an up and coming comedian in the early '80s, and then he has a stumble. Then he gets to Saturday Night Live. Doesn't really become a star in Saturday Night Live, though he's on this big platform.

Nelson George:

Then Chris decides, "I'm really going to be a great stand up." What he starts doing is listening to prior Cosby, the great white comedian Sam Kinison. I mean, he's studying all of this stuff. He builds a little stage in his house with a mic and a mirror. Yes. To watch himself because he's a good jokester, but he's not a good performer. He's very focused on performance and energy and how to keep energy on stage.

Nelson George:

He really says, "I want to be great. But to be great, I have to understand what people define as great. And why is this great by these standards?" He's already a good writer. He becomes a really good writer. He understands that the joke works because of where the words are. A joke, if you have one word too many, you mess up the line. If you have one word too few, what's the rhythm? You set up, set up, pay off. Okay.

Nelson George:

How do I set this off? How do I have a little joke here, a little laugh? Then boom. So he really becomes an incredible student of structure. Almost everything is writing. The great songwriters are great writers, whether that's how they use lyrics or how they use structure within song construction. Obviously, in screenwriting, they're different disciplines of two different art forms. But it still comes down to how to tell a story.

Nelson George:

Chris is a great example to me of someone who, "I have a voice and I know what I want to go, but I'm going to take the lessons from what happened before, see how that was done, and then extend." You know, Prince was like that. Prince had an incredible amount of knowledge. I mean, he didn't really admit it when he was younger, because it was all the mystique. But he listened to everything and was very aware of, "Okay. This is a Beatles chord," I used the Beatles chord. But this is a Stevie Wonder chord.

Nelson George:

Now, I mean, this is like Santana. As you listen to his songs, they're beautiful pastiches. He had a wider range of reference than almost anybody I know of, and was able to create his own voice through it. Yeah. I think the foundation for artists is knowledge of history or knowledge of art. Because if you go back to Hemingway, a lot of his reference points were painting.

Nelson George:

You know, Cezanne. In a painting, how much do you need to create an image that's memorable? I was amazed when you go see a great painter, and you're like, that looks like a wall of geese, but it's actually up close, a bunch of little dots. How do you do that? How many dots do you need to make something look like a geese that you stand from it's the geese? Those are the nuances.

Nelson George:

As a guy like Hemingway, how many words do I need to make people feel this? They're both inspirational and clinical, because there's a certain level of analysis. Also, I think honesty about your own skill set. Who the fuck are you? What do you really have to say? What moves you? I mean, you really have to have a great deal of self-awareness. That comes with trial and error. But definitely over time, for me, I know there are things that I can do that no one else does.

Nelson George:

For example, there's a ton of people who talk about the politics of race. They don't need me to be that guy. What I need to do is go through the things I know—I love music, I love sports, I love culture—and delve through that. All the other things are there in the narrative because they affect the creation of these art forms. But going through that door makes me, to me, more unique.

Nelson George:

I don't want to be on CNN talking on a panel of people about whatever hot. When you see me on TV, I'm always talking about some shit I really know. I'm not an opinionator. I want to say, "I'm an expert in this. What you're getting is a really thoughtful analysis." I'm very particular about what I talk about.

Andrea Chalupa:

So, to be an artist, to find your voice in the world, go narrow and deep.

Nelson George:

I think that's the way. I always say, "Okay. What is it that you do?" Because I mean, there's always people who want to be a producer. Okay. Okay. "What are you bringing to the table for this production? Why are you here?" If you can't answer that question, and fill a slot that's not being filled by someone else, you shouldn't be on that project, whether you're talking head or producer. What do you bring to the table?

Nelson George:

I always ask myself that about projects I'm involved in. I'm also very aware... I'm going to get into this, the art of collaboration.

Andrea Chalupa:

Which is an absolute art form. Collaboration is everything for the artists.

Nelson George:

I've been a boss. I've been a cog in a machine. I've been just the adjunct to help people get their money. You really have to understand why you're there and what you're trying to achieve. When I worked with Chris, Chris doesn't need me to write a joke.

Andrea Chalupa:

Chris Rock.

Nelson George:

Chris Rock didn't need me to write a joke. With Chris, I've basically been an advisor, throw stuff off of me. A facilitator, maybe doing stuff that he doesn't want to do himself, and whether that's ease in firing somebody, which I haven't had to do, or helping him flesh out some research thing. That's been our relationship. We've done a bunch of stuff over the years at different times. Each time the relationship changes also, because as he's grown and gotten more mature ... like *CB4*, I co-wrote the script with him, because I was the writer guy.

Nelson George:

By the time we worked on *Good Hair*, I was already a filmmaker as well so I helped him structure stuff and do a lot of that work for *Good Hair*. *Top Five*, I was an associate producer, but now Chris can write his own script. I'm just looking at the script and giving notes and being just a backup to him when he's shooting the movie and making a suggestion here or there. What about this word?

Nelson George:

That's the thing, when you have... for long-term collaborations, the relationship changes as people gain more skills. That's a good example of that. When I worked with Misty Copeland on the *Ballerina's Tale* documentary, she was on a down point. She was injured and she may or may not come back. I said, "Listen, you're a great story one way or the other. I don't know how you. I don't know how it's going to turn out. But let me hang out with you."

Nelson George:

She allowed me to enter her world and just follow around with a camera. As time went on, I was able to raise more money and add more camera people and more sophistication, but it started very, very much me and a little camera just watching her at a rehearsal. Her only thing was, "If we get this together, I have to have control or input into the dance sequences, how they were cut."

Nelson George:

I'm like, "Hell yeah. I don't want you dancing off beat." We had to re-cut, sometimes, some scenes if she felt like, "No, my leg is in the wrong spot," very subtle stuff that we, as laymen, would not get, but she totally was ... whatever the rest of the narrative she was good with.

Andrea Chalupa:

The theme I'm seeing is the exact science of greatness.

Nelson George:

Right. You have to work with each one of these individuals. What is your goal with them? Also define what it is you want out of it, and what they need, or how you can support them. Essentially, we were collaborators. I mean, it was my film. But obviously, I can't do it without her. She didn't have final cut. But the things that she really cared about, I wanted to be sensitive to, because that was really her area of expertise.

Nelson George:

I'm not going to impose my idea about how to shoot a dance sequence. There was stuff that she didn't want me to do that I did do, because she's from the world of the proscenium. You should see the whole body all the time. I said, "In film, we have an opportunity to do close-ups." There is one big dance sequence in the film that ends on a close-up of her, because you can really see your face." I say, "This is an opportunity." We can never see this at the Met. It's back and forth.

Nelson George:

I've worked with Baz Luhrmann on *The Get Down*. Now, I'm sort of a consultant on this Elvis movie. There's a lot of stuff about Baz Luhrmann to say he's an amazing character. But one of the things is he's very steeped in research. If you went into the offices of *The Get Down* ...

Andrea Chalupa:

That's your Netflix series about the invention of hip hop in the South Bronx and Brooklyn in the '70s.

Nelson George:

What I did is I created timelines. I made a timeline of music in New York from the mid-'70s to the early '80s. I made a timeline of some social movements in New York. We had a wall, which is, A, full of pictures from the '70s. From disco, Studio 54, to uptown Bronx, to advertising, just everything about just images. Then one timeline was my music timeline. One timeline was sort of this city history timeline.

Nelson George:

Then the other was our fictional timeline. What we discovered as we laid it out, we watched... *The Get Down*, it's not just about the birth of hip hop. That was a sexy hook. It's about how hip hop rises slowly and disco is at the top. There's actually an endpoint which is not all in the show, but it was the goal we were driving for, is in September 1979, I think it was, there's a disco riot in Chicago.

Nelson George:

It was this famous thing where they burned these records—disco records—at a White Sox game, which people thought is the death of disco. That became the media take, was in the same month, or I think October, sometime within a month of each other, The Sugarhill Gang record comes out, *Rapper's Delight*. Okay. We're going here. That piece of true life then we go backwards and we drive the story towards that.

Nelson George:

We built the narrative of the thing around this endpoint. This disco riot and this record came out within the same period. That means that the two cultures are crossing. One's going up and one's going down. So we go backwards and tell the story from there. For example, a lot of people complained in the *Great Gatsby* movie about there's a whole sequence ...

Andrea Chalupa:

Baz Luhrmann's *Great Gatsby*.

Nelson George:

Right. I forgot who played Nick Carraway.

Andrea Chalupa:

Tobey Maguire.

Nelson George:

He's in this sanatorium.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah.

Nelson George:

I feel, what's that going to do with. Well, Fitzgerald was in a sanatorium. He used the sanatorium as a linking device for the whole movie looking back. Because the book is told from the point of view of Nick looking back. He takes the fact that Fitzgerald was actually in a sanatorium during one of his many drinking bouts, and used that as the device. Everything he does is based on real stuff.

Andrea Chalupa:

And Zelda Fitzgerald died being burned alive, trapped in a sanatorium.

Nelson George:

Yeah. That's a big theme in Fitzgerald's life. That's where that came from. In the Elvis movie—I obviously haven't seen it yet. He's still cutting it—But Elvis and Black people is a huge part of the narrative, has to be, right? It's a huge part of the cultural dialogue. I spent a lot of time interviewing Black people who knew Elvis and finding Black newspaper accounts about Elvis and seeing how, in the '50s, Black people dealt with Elvis and those who knew him.

Nelson George:

I found quite a few. I know we found a Black guy, I hope he's still alive, who grew up with him in Tupelo, Mississippi. We found several people who knew him as a teenager and knew him as an adult. That's going to inform some of the storytelling.

Andrea Chalupa:

What do they say about Elvis?

Nelson George:

That he was this weird little White kid. [laughs] What I got from it, from these people, was that Elvis was an outlier. One thing about Elvis is how poor he was. His father was in jail for, I think, writing bad checks at one point. They lived next to the Black folk, where the poor Black people were. If you ever have a

chance to go to Tupelo, Mississippi, you go down, there's a famous Elvis statue. There's the drugstore that Elvis used to hang out at and got his first guitar and there's now a big sporting arena.

Nelson George:

But what a sporting arena was was the Black entertainment section. It was the Beale Street. Then up this hill was where Black folks lived. Elvis was one of the White families in the Black neighborhood. Especially for about 2 or 3, I think 9 or 10. These guys have stories of him going to Black tent shows, the little weird White kid at the Black tent show.

Nelson George:

I'm not going to get into all of this stuff. There's so much to say about Elvis. But one thing that's very clear is that he was attracted to this, and not actually soul music, but to church music. Then there's another thing I didn't know about. We've always read these things, "well, Elvis went to Black churches when he was a teenager." Well, we found the Black church that he went to. It was a church run by a guy named Brewster, Reverend Brewster, who was the biggest Black minister in Memphis.

Nelson George:

His church was basically ... I walked it, less than a mile from the White church that Elvis went to with his mother. Not only was this church accessible, Brewster had a radio show on the White station in Memphis. It was a thing for White kids in 1951, '49, I mean, early, to go hang out in the back of this Black church and hear the singing. I always had the idea that maybe Elvis was this singular, but apparently, that was a teenage rebellion that was going on in a very segregated time and place.

Nelson George:

This is really before the official civil rights movement really starts. So this Reverend Brewster was kind of a crossover figure in Memphis, and that attracted White teenagers, one of whom was Elvis. And Elvis sometimes would take his girlfriend. It just gave me a different perspective on his journey. I believe some of that will end up in the movie.

Andrea Chalupa:

When's that movie out?

Nelson George:

June of next year.

Andrea Chalupa:

We're going to get a Baz Luhrmann Elvis film?

Nelson George:

Oh, yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

Oh, wow.

Nelson George:

Someone said to me, "Well, you're working on an Elvis thing, you're a traitor to Black people." I'm like, "Really? Is that what this is about?" I think the Elvis thing... What I'm hopeful that comes out, and then in some of the ... that the Elvis movie is an opportunity to have a real discussion about Elvis and Black culture and how the interaction. Because I think one of the things that people are doing now is taking art and politicizing art in a way that doesn't ... It's a misunderstanding of how art works.

Nelson George:

When I say that, to say that, if you're going to say that Eminem takes Black culture, then what's the discussion about Quincy Jones going to study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris? What does that say about Miles Davis listening to Stockhausen? At the highest level of art, the greatest artists take from wherever they feel inspired. *Sketches of Spain*, one of my favorite Miles Davis albums, is all based on Spanish motifs and Spanish instrumentation mixed in with his own stuff.

Nelson George:

Artists take for whatever, always. Now, you can make an argument about the economic injustices of how the music industry works because almost all Black artists in America work in some form—not all, but the great—work in some form in conjunction with the European art forms, whether it's gospel music as a derivation coming out of European choral music that we took and refracted.

Nelson George:

The same way that if you listen to Prince, Prince, especially his first *Dirty Mind* era into 1999, it's very influenced by New Wave music, the way he uses instrumentation and keyboard. That was part of his ... One of his palettes, if you will. I hate when this discussion gets so reductive around race and culture because I don't feel like it's not a one way street.

Nelson George:

In fact, that's the beauty of art, that someone like Ellington—and I'm using people I think at the highest level of art in America—take from wherever and make it their own.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. Like Picasso took from African art.

Nelson George:

Absolutely. The issue becomes when people want to deny that. But all you should do is go see some of Picasso's work hanging up. You go, "Oh, that looks a lot"—the way he's had the heads, the way the eyes are situated. "Oh, he saw this work, or he saw these sculptures, and he took from there." But that's the way art always works.

Nelson George:

I mean, if you ask me who my favorite writers are, I mean, the reason I became a writer was really Hemingway and then Fitzgerald. It wasn't Baldwin and Richard Wright, though Richard Wright is one of my favorite writers now. The *In Our Time* collection of short stories by Hemingway was super influential on me because those deceptively simple sentences, which I found that weren't so simple, as I tried to steal them.

Nelson George:

But that was a big motivation for me to be a writer. The two books that made me want to be a music writer were probably Blues People by Leroy Jones, later Amiri Baraka, and Greil Marcus' Mystery Train. White writer, Black writer, both writing about music from very different points of view, but both impactful. Everybody starts with the influence because you have to see possibility.

Nelson George:

I believe in representation and all that stuff, that you have to see people. It really helps immensely. It doesn't have to be. Like I said, Hemingway was a big influence making me be a writer, and he's about as far from me as possible. But it's nice to see that there was a Baldwin and a Wright in all those folks. I don't think it's necessary to always have your icon be someone of your race.

Nelson George:

I think that that's actually reductive. We are human beings, and we take from whatever moves us. The other thing about collaboration is when you're the boss, which I wanted to talk about... So I've produced, I direct stuff, and it's my show. In that world, then you have to be very aware of, "Am I using the people around me properly?" When I say "use" I mean, everyone's creative. They wouldn't be in your circle, if they weren't.

Nelson George:

You have to really be aware of like, "I want this to happen. But I have to be aware of the process of my editor. How does my DP work?"

Andrea Chalupa:

The director of photography, the guy that holds the camera and does light and understands how the camera works. Yeah.

Nelson George:

How do these actors work? Some actors need a lot more context than others do. Some just want to do their thing and you just tell them a little more, a little less. Some people really need to know, "What am I feeling right now?" That's part of being collaborative, too, is understanding what the team needs. There's not a one-size-fits all way to get the best out of people.

Nelson George:

My last note on collaboration is don't work with assholes. That's hard when you're young because you need the work. You have to take whatever you get to start out, and then you often run into some totally psycho person.

Andrea Chalupa:

How do you spot those people? What are the warning signs?

Nelson George:

How they treat other people, because eventually they'll treat you that way, too, no matter how special you think you are. If you see someone ... Not even abuse. I mean, it just be like they kind of make bad jokes, whatever their thing is that it irks you. You see them do that to someone else, they'll do it to you.

Andrea Chalupa:

Speaking of big bad assholes, you worked with Scott Rudin.

Nelson George:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

Who is now being outed in a very big way with a lot of extremely traumatized former employees coming forward with horrific testimony of violence, explosive behavior.

Nelson George:

I'm laughing. Yeah. He's a... I'll put it this way. Scott Rudin is one of the most interesting people I've ever met.

Andrea Chalupa:

Scott Rudin. Yeah.

Nelson George:

Scott. He really is. I saw a couple of things. I was like, "Yo." I definitely saw a couple of moments where I was like, "Wow, this is crazy."

Andrea Chalupa:

That was on Chris Rock's film that Chris wrote and directed, *Top Five*?

Nelson George:

Yeah. But at the same time, he was absolutely one of the most versed when I talk about writers. You name a writer, a playwright, a novelist, and their work, he knows who they are. He has an opinion on whether they're good or not, why they're good. One of the reasons he was so successful... because basically, everybody ... the Coen Brothers, Wes Anderson, Paul Thomas Anderson.

Nelson George:

Almost all of the elite filmmakers who we consider in that group of art filmmakers in America, they all went through Scott at some point or another, because he has incredible taste. But also, conversely, the other part of that is almost all of those guys, after they work with Scott, they don't necessarily go back. Or if they go back, the relationship changes because of all the reasons we're talking about.

Nelson George:

Everyone wants access to what Scott brings to the table, because he's become an elite. He became an elite producer, both in theatre and in film, because he really understands writing. He will make you write your shit over a lot. I don't care if you're the Coen Brothers, or Chris Rock, or whoever. He's very much a stickler about story. That was his superpower. That's why he managed to have the power that he had.

Andrea Chalupa:

What were his main principles about story? What was he pushing?

Nelson George:

Why is this here? Why is this here now in this scene? How much information does the audience need now to understand what's going on? He was really, really good on cutting out exposition. Really, really good on that. So the things move, all the pieces move in a certain way and they have a very ... I mean, I also was around Scott a bit on *Motherfucker with a Hat* on Broadway, because Chris was in it, and I was around that.

Nelson George:

I know Stephen Adly Guirgis. Stephen is a brilliant playwright. But that's probably the only piece so far that Stephen's got on Broadway. Scott was the producer. They would do some serious chopping and slashing. Obviously, he's his own worst enemy. He's done horrible things. There's a level of, I guess, general meanness. I mean, it's well-documented. But I got to say that there's a reason why he was able to get away with it, I guess, for as long as he was, is that for a lot of the creative community ... Even Denzel.

Nelson George:

He's one who produced *Fences*. He produced *Fences* as a play on Broadway with Denzel then helped produce the movie version of it. It's interesting with *Rudin* is that relationship with people ... Obviously, there's a difference between how he dealt with talent and how he dealt with his underlings. I think that that's the disconnect that people are going like, "Well, how did he do this? How did he get away with that?"

Nelson George:

Because, like most people who have long careers, they deal with everybody differently. That's one of the things about any business, I guess. But it's certainly in the entertainment business. It is about relationships, and new people do get shit on the way up. Always, almost always, on some level someone shits on you. There's always going to be abusive bosses.

Nelson George:

You're going to have to come up with strategies. That's why the assholes rule. Because if you know someone's reputation is that you really got to do your best to avoid them if you can. I mean, I had a couple of people early on, especially when I got more into film. But I found that the level of abuse and assholiness was higher, because the money is higher. It wasn't the same in journalism.

Nelson George:

I mean, in journalism there were knuckleheads. But they don't make as much money. The money makes the entitlement and the abuse more. Also it makes people hang on to the abuse because they're chasing that apple of the big money, so they'll tolerate the abuse a lot longer than a young journalist might, who's not getting that much money, so fuck you.

Andrea Chalupa:

Well, I want to tell a story about the watch out for jerks rule, specific to you. I remember one time, many years ago, you and I and our friends, we went to go see a film at the Tribeca Film Festival, made by a American guy who was based in Ukraine. I dragged you and everyone there, because I wanted to potentially work with this guy on getting Mr. Jones off the ground.

Andrea Chalupa:

This was very early on. I was maybe 24 years old, wet behind the ears. It was my first draft of *Mr. Jones* written that was it. I remember we were trying to get into this guy's film at the Tribeca Film Festival. *Rolling Stone* was having a huge party across the street and you ditched that party to come with me to this random dude's Tribeca Film. This random dude, when we went into the theater to get our tickets from him, because he promised he's going to get us all tickets.

Andrea Chalupa:

He instead went off on me. He went off on me. Just screamed at me, unleashed all this abuse on me. I came out of the theater shell-shocked and you looked at me and you're like, "What's this dude's email address?" And I gave it to you. I looked at my phone and I gave it to you, and you start writing an email to this man. The subject line of your email—from your own personal email address—the subject line of your email, telling it very politely, very professionally, telling this jerk off and saying, "You do not talk to me that way."

Andrea Chalupa:

Your subject line of this email that you wrote was "This is Andrea Chalupa." You sent this man this email on my behalf when I was shell-shocked. Then we went to some corner restaurant. I was in tears. Then we spent the rest of the night where you were telling me stories of all the jerks and all the horrible things that happened to you. But I just remember that moment was so key, because you showed me how to stand up to myself, for myself. You showed me that.

Andrea Chalupa:

I was frozen in that moment, like a deer in the headlights, shocked how things just turned on a dime like that. I thought this person was legit. You even voiced that. You were writing the email out loud, saying, "I considered you a potential serious collaborator. But what you did was inexcusable." You know what I mean? You gave me the words I needed to understand how to set boundaries. And of course, he wrote back, apologizing, and was really gut-punched by a young, "nothing young woman."

Andrea Chalupa:

Because young women especially in any industry in media entertainment are seen as disposable or objectified. Talk about representation. It's so much harder for us to find boss women and to understand what a good... and let's be honest, a sane boss woman. Because some of the women I worked with coming up were crueler than some of the men.

Andrea Chalupa:

I'm like, "Did the industry ... were you conditioned that way? Is this hyper vigilance talking, trauma talking?" It's very easy when you're coming up as a woman to flounder and not have any anchor of knowing how to set boundaries and how to find your voice and be like, "Nope. That's not right." That was a key moment for me. I just want to tell you.

Andrea Chalupa:

Because I was like, "Oh, yeah. You can set boundaries. It's a safe thing to do to set boundaries. You don't have to meet their energy level. You don't have to meet their hysteria. You can stay grounded and professional and ice cold. You can remain safe."

Nelson George:

You meet the same people going up. That journey is so long that there's no point in trying to out asshole an asshole.

Andrea Chalupa:

Right.

Nelson George:

You hit such a deep, profound thing with that. It's just so much bad stuff that can happen. That's why you have to have your sense of what is success. That's where it comes in. People get seduced by the big picture ... or this idea, "I'm going to be this big figure and so I have to sacrifice this to get there," but at every point in the journey, you have to protect yourself. You have to be aware of what I really want and what piece am I going to give away?

Nelson George:

I think what that moment's about is you were just trying to make sure you didn't give away too much of yourself in order to get to this spot. Self-respect is one of those things. Young men are unnaturally confident in their ability, I find. I find young women, unfortunately, not confident enough. I think that has a lot to do with how they're raised, everything.

Nelson George:

But certainly one of the things I've encountered in the media world is I've ended up mentoring more women than men, which I didn't expect, because I always look and I'm going to look out for the brothers and help them out, blah, blah, blah. But a lot of young men are like, "Yo, man, I got this." "You're 23, you got it, really? Okay." That sense of overwhelm... because they don't want to show any vulnerability.

Andrea Chalupa:

You mentor a lot of women because you're close with your mom. You have a complicated relationship with your father, obviously, which you write about and one of your memoirs. You have a sister and your sister has daughters.

Nelson George:

Yes.

Andrea Chalupa:

You're like a girl dad in many ways, even though you don't have children. But you have that mentality of just ... you are surrounded by a lot of strong women.

Nelson George:

I have been. My lady, she edited *Ballerina's Tale*. Leslie Norville ...

Andrea Chalupa:

Malika Weeden is your editor?

Nelson George:

Yes. Right, right.

Andrea Chalupa:

Your lady?

Nelson George:

Yes. We work on other stuff and helping her get her things done. There's a great producer, Leslie Norville. I work with a number of the docs and stuff. Diane Paragas, who I did *Brooklyn Boheme* with. Now she has her own film, *Yellow Rose*, that came out. Because of the nature of how sexism and misogyny, that these very talented young women come up and there may not be a lot of places for them to get confidence.

Nelson George:

But let me tell you, I mean, once you get a woman on your side, yo, they'll ride or die. Then it's so great to see people, see them, go and do their own thing. Now, I'm working on a project with Leslie, for example. We're going to do a multi-part series on the history of Black Canada. Leslie is a lead producer on it. I'm just like the American guy helping her out. It's great.

Nelson George:

As I'm saying about the thing about the journey, she worked on *Brooklyn Boheme*, doing a tedious job for us of something we needed to do for the edit to get ready to take it to a cable company. We had to do this whole long edit of how many people were in the movie and how long they spoke. She knocked it out. I was like, "Whoa."

Nelson George:

Then over the next few docs, she took on more and more responsibility, *Brooklyn Boheme*, and then *Ballerina's Tale*. She really, really stepped up and got really great. Went to Sundance producer's lab. Now, she's produced a bunch of stuff. She has a bunch of other docs she's produced. Now, I'm working for her. That's the journey. That's about collaboration. But I'll always work with Leslie in some form, whether we're both partners, or she's the boss, because I believe in her.

Nelson George:

I think that this collaboration thing is not about you working with someone in everything you do. I've worked with Chris Rock, *CB4*, '93. Then we worked on the *Chris Rock Show*, that was late '90s. Then I think we didn't work together again until 2008, 2009. We did *Good Hair* documentary. Then I was on *Top Five*, which is a few years later. Then I think we're going to do something ... I'll be involved in something else.

Nelson George:

But that's the beauty of all of these relationships. You come in and out. Every time you come back together, you bring some fresh information. They bring some fresh information. They're in a different place in their lives. You're in a different place in your life. You guys all move forward. I had a similar thing with Reginald Hudlin, the director of *House Party* who worked on that doc for Clarence Avant for Netflix. I'm working on a script for him now.

Nelson George:

Alan Hughes, Hughes Brothers, I've known them since they were 19. We actually never worked in anything, but we always hung out. I'd been an older brother guy to them. Now I work with them in a Tupac... they're doing a five-part Tupac doc series that'll be out next spring. One of the things about these relationships, almost all the relationships, most of them go back to that era in Fort Greene, either they would live in Fort Greene or I met them during that time when I was a journalist.

Nelson George:

I just stayed in contact with them, whether we talk about what movie's whack or what record's whack or whatever, having these people that you remain contact with. I'm always sad when these people first thing that we have in common, who doesn't speak to us anymore, because we have such here a history. I don't have any ... I find it so wonderful when I run into friends.

Nelson George:

Last night I went out, had dinner at Mr. Chow's, saw a woman I hadn't seen in 20 years. It was great to see her and I've been following her on social media. We caught up. It was great. That's the other thing about the whole longevity thing. What you find is that people that you might have had rivalry with or beef with or whatever, over time that shit all evaporates. Because if you manage to continue to move, because as you go on longer in your career, more and more than people you started with another round.

Nelson George:

They moved on to another career. Unfortunately, people start. I know starting to die now. Anybody you see who's still, "Oh, how are you doing?" Remember back and we went, Nelson, in the back room in 19.. ... it was great ... I always tell people ... I was talking to Yahya, the actor who's now ... he was Cadillac on *The Get Down*. Now he's in the Matrix. He's in *Aquaman*. He's become a big star.

Nelson George:

But he was talking about building his community. I said, "Yeah. That's it. Because the people you come up with in your 20s, if you're lucky, you're going to still know a lot of them in your 50s. In this case, in my 60s. Those bonds are golden and that shared history is golden. You always, never leave who you're going to end up working with in some form based on just this shared kinship.

Nelson George:

These generational things are very ... The boomers had their thing. My girlfriend, Malika, says, "You don't seem to judge people." I think that's one of the reasons I've been able to continue moving is I've had friends who did terrible things. I've had friends who've done heroic things. I've had friends who really hit hard times. I've had people who died really badly, and stupidly, quite honestly.

Nelson George:

I've learned that, me trying to pass judgment on their lives is ridiculous. I can't pass judgment on that. I'm not them. All I can do is see them and accept them as who they are, and deal with them as with us. That's why I've been able to, I think, to continue to work. Because unless there's a total asshole, like I said, avoid. If there's any sense of... people make mistakes, and people also do great things. They never do them again.

Nelson George:

Some people do one or two good things, and they do a lot of fucked up shit. It's like people are complicated, man. I guess that's the politics of being an adult. How do I move through this world with the quality of life, the least amount of bullshit, but also not make a ton of enemies that I don't need to make? You gotta minimize the amount of people who really don't like you, because there will be people who don't like you.

Nelson George:

You're not going to do anything about that. They just don't like you. But it's a matter of like, "Don't give extra people the reason not to like you."

Andrea Chalupa:

It's so interesting that this conversation started off about, "Let's talk about art." But art comes down to people.

Nelson George:

Absolutely.

Andrea Chalupa:

Art is community. Community is art. It's all a life-form. When I was writing *Mr. Jones*, this is from the perspective of a 27-year-old Welshman in the 1930s who went to Cambridge, a very different mindset than my own. The way I was able to tap into that life is by saying things to people in my community, in my immediate space through that screenplay that I couldn't necessarily say to their face.

Andrea Chalupa:

So much of our art that we make is exercising a lot of the demons of these relationships and the demons within ourselves that the relationships force us to confront.

Nelson George:

I mean, I did a movie for HBO called *Life Support* about a family that was dealing with someone who had HIV. That was based on my family, and my mother, and my sister. The idea of the whole film for me was the idea of the difficulty of forgiveness. That's one of the things that we wrestle with always when we have people who have addictions, or have had other ... or even committed crimes, is that they're in your family, and you grew up with them. But they did some shit that's really bad.

Nelson George:

Not just to themselves, but to other people. You can want to love them, but trying to get over that hurt, sometimes it can't be done. It lingers just under the surface. That was something I was definitely grappling with just intellectually, but emotionally. The film definitely allowed me to do that. I think that that's what art's really great at is taking these incoherent feelings that are running through us and putting them in some kind of order.

Nelson George:

Why do we all love *The Godfather*? Because it's still about family, dysfunctional family, ultimately. It's a lot of... with some cool suits and some guns. I mean, *Citizen Kane* is this great movie. It's about a guy

who's totally, totally out of touch with his own inner emotional life and thinks that money and power will solve what's wrong with him. And it doesn't.

Nelson George:

In the whole movie, he's yearning for his childhood innocence that he never could reclaim. *Citizen Kane* is about capitalism. You can name all of the big isms, it's about all of those things. But ultimately, it's about a guy who just lost something and he's searching for it, and he can't find it. We always go back to those elemental questions about who we are, and what is it that we need? Or what is it we think we need, and then what is it we need, which are often ... that's the contradiction that we have.

Andrea Chalupa:

That's the tension of every story, every creative story and real life story. I want to ask you about genius. That brings us to the night you spent in New York City with Beyonce. I didn't get into Beyonce until *Lemonade*, because I loved how she became political. Then I went back through her back catalogue. She's a genius. You had this night with her and Jay Z and other artists.

Nelson George:

Right.

Andrea Chalupa:

You described her to me as being very shy. That night, an artist that was a very, very big artist who I won't name, was among you. This artist had just come out with an album.

Nelson George:

It was a song.

Andrea Chalupa:

Or the song.

Nelson George:

Yeah. What happened is that somehow I ended up on a boat going around Manhattan. It's a long story how I ended up on a boat with Jay Z. Chris Rock would probably reason I'm on the boat. Beyonce, Alicia Keys was there somewhere, Swizz Beats was somewhere. This other artists who we won't name, who's really great, and who's a wonderful artist.

Nelson George:

Her and her manager were there on this table. They wanted to play her new single. They played a record. Throughout the night, not surprisingly, Jay Z was at the head of the table, and he was running things. He's a great storyteller. You're good with Jay Z talking. She sits there. She's pretty quiet. She only talks a few times, really, in the course of a whole evening, and other people are rambling on and blah, blah, blah. So, the record is played.

Andrea Chalupa:

The record by an artist that shall not be named, just to be clear. It's not a Beyonce album. It's another artist. Yeah.

Nelson George:

Yeah. And she said, "What do you think?" Beyonce, who's basically said maybe one or two things all night, goes, "Well, I think you should move the chorus. I think the chorus should be a verse and then you build that section up over here would be a better hook." I mean, she basically x-rayed the record in a way that was quite impressive. He did it in a very boom, boom, boom, boom, boom way. I was like, "Oh, shit."

Nelson George:

The artist herself was like, "Okay." Because Beyonce is saying ... The manager, however, [inaudible 01:06:49]

Andrea Chalupa:

Being a typical protective manager. Yeah.

Nelson George:

Yeah. But he also was dismissive. Here's a woman who is one of the preeminent hit makers of the era. You're playing her record to get her critical judgment. She's giving you unfettered real stuff about what she thinks the record could do and how it could be better. You're like, "It's coming out next week, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." You're dismissing it and even if your client wants to hear it, apparently, you're so invested in this record, because who knows, maybe you're the reason ... you may own the publishing you had...

Nelson George:

There was some deep investment in this particular arrangement that you're going to ignore what she had to say. Cut to, the record flopped. Seeing Beyonce think about how she approached what she did was pretty impressive. And she did it very, very offhandedly. She wasn't trying to be, "Here's my big idea." She's like "Well, I think you should blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." All of it was really sound.

Nelson George:

Obviously, I mean, she's a Virgo like me, yeah. Very analytical. Interesting because Michael Jackson is a Virgo. Well, I mean, I don't know if you're a horoscope person.

Andrea Chalupa:

I'm a Taurus.

Nelson George:

Okay. There you go. I was like, "Okay"...

Andrea Chalupa:

Sarah, my co-host, is a Virgo. Taurus, Virgo, we get along. Actually, you and Sarah have the same exact birthday.

Nelson George:

Oh, wow.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. September 1st. I've known you guys and I've been through some stuff with both of you guys for so long. There's definitely something in the stars about that. And my sister's a Virgo. I'm surrounded by perfectionists, because that's my energy. That's what I bring as a Taurus because we're the workhorses. We'll get it done no matter what.

Nelson George:

The analytical thing. I was really impressed with her analytical powers. I think that's probably something that doesn't get in between the dancing and all the other visual aspects. The foundation goes back to writing. I think I said at the beginning when we started sitting down, because song structure is a form of writing; introduction, creating drama, what's the high point of the record, what's the high point of ... It's all a form of narrative.

Nelson George:

I guess, maybe that's even a better way to put it. You at one point earlier I said I do all these different things. I really don't do a lot of different things. I do the same thing. It's just they're all narrative. There are different techniques within a screenplay versus a teleplay versus a novel. Sure. But they all are narrative. There's a story. There's a beginning. There's drama. There's conflict. There's love. And there's some kind of resolution.

Nelson George:

That's true of all stories, whether it's a song or a play or a documentary. When it works good, there's usually one central unifying idea with all these other tributary ideas around it. I actually think it's all the same thing. People say, "Well, you do a lot of different things." But I'm also only doing one thing at a time. When I'm working on Tupac and I have to do a pre-interview, I'm really zeroed in on what we need out of this person for the film.

Nelson George:

I'm working on, I'm doing a doc on Willie Mays. I went down to Alabama. I spent a week in Birmingham, interviewed a 90-year-old man, a 92-year-old man, and a 96-year-old man, and a 74-year-old woman. I'm asking them stuff that happened 60 years ago. You have to be open to the fact that not every detail ... "according to your research this happened." I mean, you remember what happened last week, much less happened 30 years ago.

Nelson George:

Trying to find a narrative ... Even in the interview, you're trying to find a narrative. What are the pieces of this that only they can give me because they were there? I can interview a bunch of scholars, but they were there. He sat next to Willie Mays in the dugout in 1948. What was that like? You know? The other guy went to high school with Willie Mays. He showed me pictures of Willie Mays' high school girlfriend. Like, "Huh, what?"

Nelson George:

That's it. It's always about narrative, I think. It's always about a story.

Andrea Chalupa:

What frustrates me, as a writer, is screenwriting is easy. I have a hard time with novel writing. I have a novel I've been working on for a million years. I feel like I can't seem to crack the novel writing code.

Nelson George:

That's because the thing about screenplays is they're very structured.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. I love the structure. Because it's the Taurus in me that just wants to build things. You build the structure, it's done. Novel writing feels a lot looser. There's no boundaries. Getting into someone's head for million I don't like it. I need the roles. I need the structure.

Nelson George:

It's interesting, because one reason... When I started out, I did more freeform novels, edited a couple love stories and stuff like that. Once I got into the doing the [Whyte Eschard 01:11:48] story, it was easier. You may need to take your story, put it in a genre. Genre writing, there are some rules. There is a villain of some kind. There is a series of obstacles that whoever the person is is investigating.

Nelson George:

Genre, I mean, I love doing those. I mean, I don't know if I want to ever go back to just writing a novel. Also because when you do a series of books—like I've done these D Hunter novels—there is continuity because I can bring characters back, there's relationships that happen or, I'm always thinking, so last book, he was a bodyguard. Those books, he's gone from now a bodyguard. Now he has his own management company. He's a bodyguard in Brooklyn. Now he's got a management company in LA.

Nelson George:

I would say one way to look at ... even if you don't make it a straight up genre, you might look at sci-fi or something like that books as a way to create your world. Because I mean, the great thing about sci-fi is world creation. That's what those are really all about. Some of the best writing comes out of these genres, because there are some things you need to put in there that are similar to a screenplay, I guess.

Andrea Chalupa:

That's so interesting. So, screenwriting, you are bound by the three-act structure. Yo've got to have the 90 to 120 pages. There's certain limitations.

Nelson George:

Commercial, I always think that the ... Listen, there used to be the five-act structure.

Andrea Chalupa:

Right. Right.

Nelson George:

Sometimes I think the three-act thing is a noose. On one hand, the audience is used to it so they're expecting certain things. On the other hand, it leaves her predictability. This can be like, "Oh, okay. She's coming back. Now, blah, blah, blah." I think the three-act structure is a noose as well.

Andrea Chalupa:

How do you approach screenwriting?

Nelson George:

I don't think I'm a really good screenwriter, actually. I like the looseness better. The room for digression that you have in nonfiction and novels, I think I'm better at that than I am in screenwriting. I find the form confining. I find it confining. I like the freeform stuff. I like the digressions that are a big part of definitely novels and a lot of nonfiction where you have a moment where, "Okay."

Nelson George:

You can do a page about this woman's backstory and why she ended up where her family's from, and where she likes to buy her shoes. You can really have fun. We go back to the plot but now you know everything you need about that character and her world.

Andrea Chalupa:

Whereas in screenwriting, you just sum that all up in one little pithy line of dialogue.

Nelson George:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

I love that. I like just getting to the point, getting to the chase. With the novel writing I'm like, "Too many options, too many directions, too much freedom."

Nelson George:

But that's the beauty.

Andrea Chalupa:

I like the confinement of screenwriting.

Nelson George:

That's sensibility-wise. What happens and I say, "what are you about?", you will begin to gravitate to the thing that is the most convenient for you or most comfortable based on your skill set. I think that's the beauty of it is that over time we try everything when we're young and we find out what we're really good at. Or we evolve into it, gain some mastery.

Nelson George:

Maybe then you might try and go back and do the novel. Maybe it's just not the right time for you.

Andrea Chalupa:

What about documentary filmmaking? I've written and directed one short documentary film. I'm writing a feature length documentary film. If you really have to come in as a storyteller, and build a narrative, and tease people, and build and build, and just give them just enough, just enough, just so they know there's this issue, and this issue exists, and this is how it could impact you.

Nelson George:

Well, I would say this. Is there a way to convey this information visually, and not necessarily ... Before I did *Ballerina's Tale*, I did a bunch of more traditional talking head docs. But *Ballerina's Tale*, I had a person who moved for a living. I wanted to have her move. She's going to the city. She's got a great mover. Why am I sitting here in front of a thing all the time?

Nelson George:

Misty should be walking around New York. She should be walking through Paris or Venice or Australia. We should see ... Because she's going to dance. She's a mover. There's no point in this being a talking head doc, because you have to have some in, but it's got to be about her body. There's a whole ... One of the best sequences in the movie.

Nelson George:

The two best sequences in the movie, she meets an older ballerina friend of hers who comes to see her, she's injured, and they end up dancing together. Audience loved it, because there's movement and they're ... this idea of generations. That's when we went with her to a chiropractor, to an Italian chiropractor. Not only is he breaking her ... cracking her bones, but he's also speaking another language and they can't communicate.

Nelson George:

The sequences that had that were the best sequences in the movie. There's always ways but you do have to think differently.

Andrea Chalupa:

Given the power of storytelling, does it even matter? Does art matter? What's the point of art in our existence? What's the point of anybody making art, whether they're going to be a Spike Lee, or not a Spike Lee? True essence of what art is, what service it provides, if any? Why do we need art? Does art matter?

Nelson George:

Try and tell somebody about your life without telling a story. Try and tell someone about the political situation in a place without telling a story. Try and tell someone how to fix their marriage without telling a story. We live the story. Stories are who we are. Stories are how we communicate everything. And art is a heightened level of storytelling.

Nelson George:

Saying we don't need art is like saying we don't need storytelling. It's like saying we don't want to understand the world we're in. It's just that simple. We're storytellers, all of us. We learn from the "Mommy, my thing got hurt outside... The guy hit me." We're all telling a story. "What happened?"

"Well, what happened was..." That's all art is. Art is the heightened, refined version of us telling the story to our mother to try and get a bigger lollipop.

Nelson George:

It is. It's all art. It's just a better version of that. To say we don't need art is to say we don't need storytelling is to say we don't want to talk to each other.

Andrea Chalupa:

But what's the point of making art alone in your room, if no one's ever going to see it?

Nelson George:

You saw it. You're somebody. I mean, there's some people who are fortunate enough to make pop, whatever, whether it's Spielberg or Michael Jackson, these big people who do big, global things. But that's an infinitesimally small number of people who do that. Most stories are told one-to-one. They're very intimate, and if people or you are moved by them, then they've done their job.

Nelson George:

If they've changed your mood, if you made a piece of art in your living room that changed your mood or gave you a different perspective on your life, then it's done its job. Everything is not for everybody. That's one reason I love doing so many different styles. If I'm doing ... I have a substack, *Nelson George Mixtape*. I put stuff up there that I want to put up.

Nelson George:

There's a couple of 100 people who like it, and they follow me, and sometimes give me money. That's fine. I work on this Tupac thing. I'm sure it'll be a five-part series on FX. It's Tupac. It's going to be a big, a lot of media. It'll be a lot of coverage. That'll be that. But each piece exists in a different plane. Each piece exists to be received by people differently. That's what it is. There is no art for everyone. No art for everybody. No. It's not.

Nelson George:

Some art is for you. Some art is for your friends. Some art is for 20,000 people at Madison Square Garden. It's all different. There's no one-size-fits-all.

Andrea Chalupa:

Does it matter in the world in terms of "Can art save the world?"

Nelson George:

People save the world, not art. I don't think art is this elevated thing does. It just informs how we perceive the world. Art is a tool for us to see. People have to change the world. Art is only a vehicle. It's an expression of people. If it moves people, then people will internalize the lessons of the art and move. But the art itself... because a piece of art is all contextual.

Nelson George:

Your great song by Jay Z may be incomprehensible to someone in India. Or other great Hindu work that's made in Chennai means nothing in Timbuktu. Art is very contextual. It's about universal value, but we

know something's beautiful when we see it. We have a feeling about it. But the context of the art is both crucially important and totally irrelevant.

Nelson George:

That knowing more about why Stevie Wonder is great, and coming from Motown, he's blind, and that informs a lot of that experience. But you can hear a Stevie Wonder song and hear the melody and think, "Wow, that's beautiful. I don't know anything else about it. But I really like it." We always say, "Well, it can't be taken out of context." Well, yes, it can be taken out of context, because most people don't.

Nelson George:

In their day-to-day life do not have time to research where a song or a movie comes from. They just take it in. They either get something emotional out of it, and then get curious, or they don't, or it just washes over them. I think it's harder and harder to make art or make storytelling that cuts through because there are more outlets, more voices. I think that idea of what you're trying to achieve is very important.

Nelson George:

Are you trying to express something? Great. Are you trying to make a million dollars, or \$2 million, in maybe Bitcoin? That's great. But that doesn't mean you're going to do it. You need to be accepting of the fact that the satisfaction comes from the creation. Once it goes in the world, you have no control. If you're not making it to satisfy something inside you and getting satisfaction out of that experience, then you're missing out on what the story is about.

Andrea Chalupa:

Our discussion continues and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the Truth Teller level or higher.

Sarah Kendzior:

We want to encourage you to donate to your local food bank, which is experiencing a spike in demand. We also encourage you to donate to Oil Change International, an advocacy group supported with a generous donation from the Greta Thunberg Foundation that exposes the true costs of fossil fuels and facilitates the ongoing transition to clean energy.

Andrea Chalupa:

We also encourage you to donate to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian relief organization helping refugees from Syria donate at rescue.org. If you want to help critically endangered orangutans already under pressure from the palm oil industry, donate to The Orangutan Project at orangutanproject.org.

Andrea Chalupa:

If you want to see, confirm the fact that orangutan is pronounced correctly, go to the Merriam Webster dictionary.

Andrea Chalupa:

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