

AFI Spotlight Interview on Editor Affonso Gonalves

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

AFI Alum Affonso Gonalves (AFI Class of 1993), ACE, has made a name for himself as one of the most acclaimed, sought-after editors in Hollywood. After graduating from AFI, Gonalves moved to New York and got his start as an assistant editor on Todd Solondz's WELCOME TO THE DOLLHOUSE.



Affonso Goncalves

His filmography includes prolific collaborations with independent auteurs Jim Jarmusch (ONLY LOVERS LEFT ALIVE, PATERSON and GIMME DANGER), Benh Zeitlin (BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD, WENDY) and Todd Haynes (MILDRED PIERCE, CAROL, WONDERSTRUCK, DARK WATERS and THE VELVET UNDERGROUND). For his editing work on TRUE DETECTIVE, Gonalves won an American Cinema Editors award for Best Edited One-Hour Series in 2015 and received his first Primetime Emmy® Award Nomination for Outstanding Single-Camera Picture Editing for a Drama Series.

AFI spoke with him about his experience at the AFI Conservatory and editing THE LOST DAUGHTER, THE VELVET UNDERGROUND and DON'T WORRY DARLING – three of the most anticipated films of this year.

AFI: What made you want to pursue editing as a career, and how did you first come to study at the American Film Institute?

Affonso: I'm originally from Brazil, and I went to England to study at the London Film School. I was there for three years and completely fell in love with editing. I had a friend in my class a year prior to me

who went to AFI and was in the Cinematography program. So I applied, specifically for editing, and I got in. At the time not everyone continued onto the second year which was a bit nerve-wracking, but I really loved my time at AFI.

AFI: What was it like having your films THE LOST DAUGHTER and THE VELVET UNDERGROUND both play at Telluride this year?

Affonso: It was pretty great and such an honor. The timing of it all is crazy because we finished THE VELVET UNDERGROUND last year, but we had to wait because the film has so much archival footage, that it took a while to clear everything. And by the time it cleared, we were waiting to premiere it at one of the fall festivals. Todd Haynes, the director, also really wanted it to play at the New York Film Festival. So we kept pushing, so we could hit that mark.

With THE LOST DAUGHTER, we finished the film in March of this year, and, similarly, we wanted to apply to the fall festivals. So it was actually a complete coincidence that they both happened to get into Telluride. And THE LOST DAUGHTER is playing at the New York Film Festival as well.

AFI: THE VELVET UNDERGROUND marks your fifth collaboration with director Todd Haynes. Can you talk about the unconventional circumstances of working on it during COVID and how you adapted to finish the film?

Affonso: Todd and I were both in LA. We started in late January and found this cutting room in Venice. We were working there, and then COVID hit, and everybody left. So it was just me and Todd. We would make sure that we were six feet apart. And we wouldn't see anybody. He'd walk to work; I'd bike to work, and we'd edit all day.

We had a second editor, Adam Kurnitz, who was based in New York. He was originally supposed to travel back and forth, but then with the pandemic, he couldn't obviously. So we just sent each other cuts to finish the project.

AFI: You've previously worked on another concert film about The Stooges (GIMME DANGER). How did that prepare you, and does your approach differ when you're editing a documentary as opposed to a narrative film?

Affonso: I mean, the approach was a little bit different with The Stooges documentary. There wasn't that much footage of them, so we didn't have as much to work with. The film was more centered on the Iggy Pop interview and building the structure around him. It definitely prepared me in terms of the way to use music and language. I also did it with the same collaborator, Adam, who I worked with on THE VELVET UNDERGROUND, so it was similar in that sense. We knew how each other worked and how to feed each other ideas.

AFI: Was there something about The Velvet Underground that surprised you that you learned over the course of working on the project? What was it like to comb through footage, including the last major interview with avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas whom the documentary is dedicated to?

Affonso: Yeah, it was really special. It was great to get Jonas, it was great to get so much of John Cale, Maureen Tucker and Jonathan Richman — all of the material with people who don't usually

give interviews. They were super generous, so I learned a lot from combing through the footage.

AFI: You’ve teamed up multiple times with directors including Todd Haynes, Jim Jarmusch and Benh Zeitlin. What makes for the best collaboration between a director and an editor?

Affonso: I think just having an open dialogue. Maybe that sounds corny, but I think with all the directors that I’ve been incredibly blessed to work with, they’re open to other ideas. I’m honest with my ideas; they’re honest with their ideas. They’re willing to experiment, and I think that makes for the best environment. Once you’re in the cutting room, it’s great to just try things and explore all the different possibilities together.

AFI: What drew you to the project THE LOST DAUGHTER, and what was it like working with Maggie Gyllenhaal on her feature directorial debut?

Affonso: It was great. Maggie reached out to me and sent me the script for THE LOST DAUGHTER. I read it, and I liked it a lot. It was really beautifully written. Production on the film was supposed to happen fast, but then it got pushed because of COVID. Then she was offered to direct this Netflix anthology series called HOMEMADE in which Pablo Larrain enlisted 14 directors to tell short stories about COVID, and she was one of them. She called me and said “Ok, I got this project. Do you want to do it?” We worked together on that project completely remotely. She sent me the script and then the footage. We talked often, cut it together, and it worked really beautifully. So it was a dry run for making a feature together.

I just waited for her to shoot THE LOST DAUGHTER, which kept changing locations. At one point, it was going to shoot on the Jersey Shore, and then Maine, and then finally they found a way to shoot it in Greece. And then she and I cut the film together in New York, and it was a really wonderful experience.

AFI: What were some of the joys and/or challenges of working on the project and weaving together the timelines of Leda, played by Olivia Colman and Jessie Buckley at different ages?

Affonso: I mean, the short answer is that it was amazing because you get to cut footage with Olivia Colman and Jessie Buckey and, for that alone, I said, “sign me up!” And then there’s Dakota [Johnson], Peter [Sarsgaard], Paul Mescal, Ed Harris — they’re all awesome. So much of the timelines were scripted. But the way we shaped the character’s memory, when it comes in, when it comes out, and the use of sound, visuals and music — we experimented a lot. And Maggie was very, very smart at pointing out the things she liked and didn’t like, so we could weave it through together. But anytime you have a chance to do something like that, it was such a gift to get to be a part of it.

AFI: What projects are you looking forward to working on next?

Affonso: I’m currently working on Olivia Wilde’s DON’T WORRY DARLING, which has also been a wonderful experience. They had another editor originally who had to leave, so then Olivia was working with two other editors. And I came on board basically to finish the film with her. We’ve worked together for about three months, and now we’re at the tail-end of it. She’s now a super accomplished director and a very smart, very natural filmmaker. It’s really interesting to work with directors who are also actors because the level of detail and specificity with acting and performance is great. Of course, filmmakers like Todd or Jim or Ben have it too, but it’s a little bit different in the way they view the performance. So it’s been a great learning experience for me.

After this, Todd is supposed to do a film about Peggy Lee called FEVER sometime next year. That, in theory, will be my next project.

AFI: What advice would you offer to current AFI Fellows and recent alumni who are interesting in following your trajectory as editors?

Affonso: I always encourage people to go to AFI because of all the people you meet there and can build really great relationships with. I'd say stay with those relationships and go after any work you can. From AFI, I moved immediately to New York with the help of my friend and AFI classmate Alan Oxman (AFI Class of 1993), and I cut short films for students from Columbia University. I did whatever I could to keep working and honing my skills.

Looking back, when I graduated and started working, that was when I started to really appreciate AFI because everything I had learned, I could immediately start putting into practice and apply to the actual job.



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