

# ANISHINABE

Jason Brennan

I wanted to study film and television production relatively early on. Around the age of fifteen, I already had an interest, but I wasn't sure if I would be able to achieve my goal, and I didn't have a role model who would have helped me believe in it. As a young adult, I started working here and there, odd jobs, and finally at the age of twenty-two I decided to go back to school. I enrolled in television production at Algonquin College in Ottawa. It took me a while to fully realize that this was what I was going to do, that I was going to pursue my dream. What I mean is that, often in life we make that sort of decision after trying out other things, and realizing that our true passion lies elsewhere. We have to become our own role models.

This is one of the things that differentiates Indigenous and non-Indigenous realities. It has to be said that, as Indigenous leaders or artists, we have a kind of responsibility when we choose to broach themes that are very close to our culture. I think that, in the end, as an Indigenous person, I'm more likely to take into account

the opinion of my family, my community, my Elders. It makes a big difference. And I take what I learn from them into account, it's so important. I think we have to do it. As a leader, we also try to further the cause, or the culture, so we'll often hear about people who are sharing their success with others so that there is a tangible impact on the community; the experience and the success impact as many people as possible.

My father is Indigenous and my mother is Québécoise, so I know that I haven't faced the same challenges as some of my fellow artists. I don't look typically Indigenous—my skin isn't dark, I don't have black hair. I've never had to experience the racism of the first encounter, that first impression. On the other hand, I have often faced barriers to creating Indigenous content because decision-makers—funders—don't believe there's a market for our art. Which is ironic, because if you look at what's been happening in the last few years, you can see that there have been a lot of success stories. In film, so many projects have really touched people. Challenges just mean you have to roll up your sleeves. It's a matter of knowing how we can enhance the particular richness of our art and make it available to the public. Finding out how to position it in a certain light, so people can take it in and enjoy it. I think we have to go beyond simply promoting culture in Canada, and make sure it's alive and vibrant internationally. At Nish Media, we realized very quickly that there's an interest worldwide. In the end, it's persistence that gets you there. Don't get discouraged, work hard. When you work in Indigenous arts, as we know, you always have to put in a little extra effort. An artist working in a non-Indigenous context,

with an established market, won't necessarily encounter the same problems. You also have to consider the importance of knowing the plays, films, and books that other Indigenous artists have created before. You have to try to understand what it is that works, in those earlier pieces. We know that in our communities we're people who like to share, so we shouldn't be afraid to ask questions, to explore, to meet other artists.

On the other hand, all of this comes naturally to me. Being Indigenous is my experience. My father grew up in a community. Many of my family members still live there, it's part of who I am. Whether it's in my career as a producer or as a director, I tell stories I know. I wouldn't pretend to tell a story about a culture or an aspect of the culture that I don't know or that I don't have a connection to. My artistic approach is based on fact and experience. Sometimes it's from stories I heard when I was young. Like all artists, I try to draw inspiration from what I know and also from what knows me. If you don't have an emotional connection to what you're telling, people see that and feel it. So the idea is to keep your eyes open. There are themes and ideas I've always wanted to explore. There are things I want to say and it's a matter of finding the right medium, to reach as many people as possible with these stories. When I'm in production, it can also mean helping a young writer or director delve deeper into their experience. Obviously, the stories they're trying to tell have to move me too, so that I can commit fully and support them to the very end. The personal attachment to each project is crucial, in my opinion.

I think what's in store for us in the next few years is very positive. There are more and more Indigenous artists and creators who are exploring avenues very close to our cultures. The important thing is to be aware of the best work, even while realizing that you have to renew yourself constantly. There are many people who are working really well. We're now at the point where we have to stand out with innovative, original proposals. We have to keep doing what we love, while keeping in mind the importance of standing out.

As Indigenous leaders, we also have to be careful not to lose ourselves in all of it, to remember why we decided to become artists. We must never forget who we are or where we come from; there's value in what binds us to our communities.