

**MAKING MY
FIRST FILM
MAYA
KATHERINE**

ACADEMY

FILM PRODUCTION TEAMS ARE...

brought together by a shared passion for visual storytelling. But, often, the team members' differences are more pronounced than their similarities. Teams see variances in age, experience, and vision for the project. Bickering about the budget is a common occurrence as well.

On a small-scale film, it's the director who sits at the center of these difficult dynamics.

They need to uphold and deliver on the overall creative objectives while keeping fall-outs to a minimum and balancing the books. It's not easy! Especially when it's your first time taking up the role.

That's precisely what first-time director **MAYA KATHERINE** is experiencing in the lead-up to day one of shooting on **MOISHE**. The story not only carries significance as Maya's first financially-backed film but is an intensely personal telling of her great-great grandfather's horrifying past, subjected to kidnap and abuse at the hands of the Russian Empire some 200 years ago.

Moishe's story aside, Maya's character arc also has it all: the constant pangs of Imposter Syndrome that many young (female) directors face, putting together a team against the backdrop of a pandemic, the weight of intergenerational trauma, and how filmmaking can help heal it.

We sat down to speak with Maya in London, days before she and her team fly off to Ireland to start filming *Moishe*, to learn how she got to where she is today – and what other content creators, anyone, anywhere, can take from Maya's experience in their own creative journey.



THE ORIGINS OF MOISHE

Moishe is the true story of how **MOISHE GRALNICK, MAYA'S GREAT-GREAT-GRANDFATHER**, and many other young Jewish boys were taken from their homes in Ukraine to "be integrated into the rest of the Russian Empire." In reality, these children, as young as 8 or 9, were forced to convert to Christianity before serving 25 years in the army.

Over 20 minutes, Maya's film shows the mistreatment of these boys, known now in history as the **CANTONISTS** – those who refused to convert, like Moishe, endured beatings and abuse in the hope that their spirits would break.

But Moishe's spirit never did. And that's how his tale became a proud family heirloom, passed down from Moishe to his grandson, Maya's grandfather, **CHARLES COOPER**, and then eventually to Maya.

Charles, a filmmaker himself, penned the first synopsis for Moishe on his typewriter but passed away before he could make the feature. Maya was just a baby when Charles died, so Moishe the film has allowed Maya to "connect" with a grandfather she never got the chance to know.





CHARLES COOPER, MAYA'S GRANDFATHER



I SHOULD BE THE ONE TO TELL THE STORY...

Maya is no stranger to screenplays and film sets, despite this being her first major project.

“I STARTED WRITING LITTLE STORIES WHEN I WAS A CHILD, AND MY DAD WOULD TELL US STORIES, TOO. MY FAVORITE ONE HE’D TELL US WAS A SCI-FI STORY, AND IT WASN’T UNTIL I GREW UP AND READ BRAVE NEW WORLD THAT I REALIZED HE WAS JUST RE-TELLING THAT!”

An early interest in storytelling led Maya to acting school and to study TV and Film Production BTEC at college. **“WE WOULD DO THESE ‘MAKE A FILM IN A WEEK’ CHALLENGES OVER SUMMER AT ACTING SCHOOL – I TOOK EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO WRITE AND THEN ALSO BE IN CHARGE IF I COULD BE!”** So with support and tuition from teachers and **CELTX’S** free scriptwriting software, Maya’s ideas for Moishe started to take shape.

“I HAD NO IDEA WHEN I FIRST STARTED ON THE SCRIPT. I WAS GOING IN TOTALLY BLIND,” Maya admits. But, she knew more than she thought, thanks to two crucial knowledge banks: her family’s collective memory and the deep level of research she’d done into historical accounts of the Cantonists (of which there are few and most are written in Yiddish!)

While both resources have been hugely influential as the screenplay for Moishe came together, Maya’s closeness to the story has come under some critical scrutiny. **“I’VE BEEN TOLD THAT I SHOULD HAND THE PROJECT TO SOMEONE ELSE BECAUSE I’M TOO CLOSE TO THE SUBJECT AND TOO INVESTED. WHICH I TRY TO UNDERSTAND – AND I GET THAT IT MIGHT BE TRUE FROM A TECHNICAL PERSPECTIVE. BUT THIS IS MY FAMILY HISTORY. I SHOULD BE THE ONE TO TELL THE STORY.”**

No doubt Maya’s personal connection to Moishe is what’s helped the project get backing. A Kickstarter campaign launched in June 2021 has raised over £26,000: funding that has gone towards professional (but affordable!) equipment, costume, insurance, and travel for the cast and crew to Ireland, where the film will start shooting soon.

Not bad for a “lockdown project,” is it?





MAYA KATHERINE



ANYONE WANNA HELP?

With funding coming in, Maya turned her attention to building the full team. She'd already secured some key members, including Serra, Moishe's producer, and Daniel Gal, the director of photography.



“I PUT A MESSAGE OUT ON A FACEBOOK GROUP EXPLAINING THE PROJECT AND ASKING, ‘DOES ANYONE WANNA HELP?’” Maya recounts, and Serra stood out immediately within the messages she got back.

“I WAS LOOKING FOR BOTH A TECHNICAL AND EMOTIONAL MATCH,” Maya remembers. **“SERRA HAD BEAUTIFUL CINEMATOGRAPHY, BUT SHE ALSO HAD A CLEAR VISION OF MOISHE AND WHERE SHE WANTED TO TAKE IT.”**

That passion attracted Maya; it was a clear indication that Serra bought into the project on a level beyond financial gain.

Has working with the team been this easy throughout? Hardly. But that's to be expected...



I DIDN'T KNOW BUTTONS WERE GOING TO BE AN ISSUE...

Collaboration is hugely important for any film project, but it can make or break a production as tight-knit as Moishe. Managing the Art Department's expectations has been the biggest challenge that Maya has faced to date: **"THEY WANTED TO BE VERY HISTORICALLY ACCURATE, AND WE JUST DON'T HAVE THE BUDGET FOR VINTAGE PIECES. THERE'S BEEN A CONSTANT BACK AND FORTH OF YEAH, SURE, THAT LOOKS GREAT... BUT WE CAN'T AFFORD IT!"**

"I TEND TO BE QUITE A PASSIVE PERSON IN GENERAL," says Maya, **"I TRY TO PLEASE EVERYONE AND JUST BE NICE."** And that's something she's had to grapple with as the project's gone on. From telling the crew when and where they need to be somewhere — not easy when your camera operator gets a better paying job one week before filming — to standing her ground over casting decisions, Maya has certainly had to take a firmer approach than she's used to.

"IN CASTING, THERE WAS AN ACTOR THAT I WAS SURE WAS OUR MAIN CHARACTER, JAX. I HAD TO BE REALLY ASSERTIVE AND SAY, 'I'M THE DIRECTOR, TECHNICALLY IT'S MY MONEY, IT'S MY PROJECT.' IT'S QUITE EMPOWERING. I'VE NEVER DONE THAT BEFORE!"

And the buttons? Maya laughs as she says: **"THERE ARE PLENTY OF DIFFICULT THINGS TO COPE WITH AS A FIRST-TIME DIRECTOR — BUT I DIDN'T KNOW THAT I'D ARGUE WITH THE COSTUME TEAM ABOUT WHICH BUTTONS TO USE!"**



WE'LL DO IT IN POST...

Similar conversations have had to be had around film equipment, too. Maya has had to encourage a certain budget-savviness with the crew and DP.

“WE JUST NEED TO BE ABLE TO SEE WHAT WE NEED TO SEE AND HEAR WHAT WE NEED TO HEAR,” she explains when speaking of how to spend the budget — and for everything else, there's always post-production.

For that, Maya will have access to the **FILMWORKZ** suite of color grading and finishing tools. Fun fact; Jaxon Knopf — the lead actor Maya fought to secure — is the nephew of **DANIEL BROCH**, who founded **FILMWORKZ** and **EVERYMAN CINEMA**.

That just goes to show what networking can do.

But before the footage even gets into post-production, Maya's got another first-time experience ahead of her. **“HOW DO WE GET IT FROM THESE MASSIVE HARD DRIVES TO THE EDITING TABLE? FOR ALL MY PAST STUFF, IT'S JUST BEEN ON MY MACBOOK, AND I'VE EDITED IT. THIS IS OUT OF MY LEAGUE!”**





OH, YOU'RE THE DIRECTOR?



Speaking with Maya, though, you quickly get the sense that nothing is truly out of her league. She's up against some systemic discrimination, for sure. But she's already showing the world what she's capable of – she had a reputation at school which was based on her natural leadership abilities.

We're holding back from saying 'bossiness' for a reason, as that's simply too reductive and, honestly, offensive to Maya's growth journey.

“THERE'S A BIG THING ABOUT WOMEN IN THE INDUSTRY TAKING CHARGE. I'VE HAD SEVERAL MEN SAY 'OH, YOU'RE THE DIRECTOR?' AS THEY AUDITION! IT'S REALLY HARD NOT TO HIDE IN A SHELL AND LET THE OTHER, OLDER PEOPLE – MALE PEOPLE – TAKE CONTROL. IF YOU'RE A BOSSY WOMAN, YOU GET CALLED A DIVA. WE'RE TOLD WE'RE OVER-REACTING.”

Changing that narrative has been another driving force for Maya's project – and that's one of the main reasons women make up a large part of Moisha's crew.



PEOPLE ARE TRUSTING ME SO I SHOULD TRUST MYSELF...

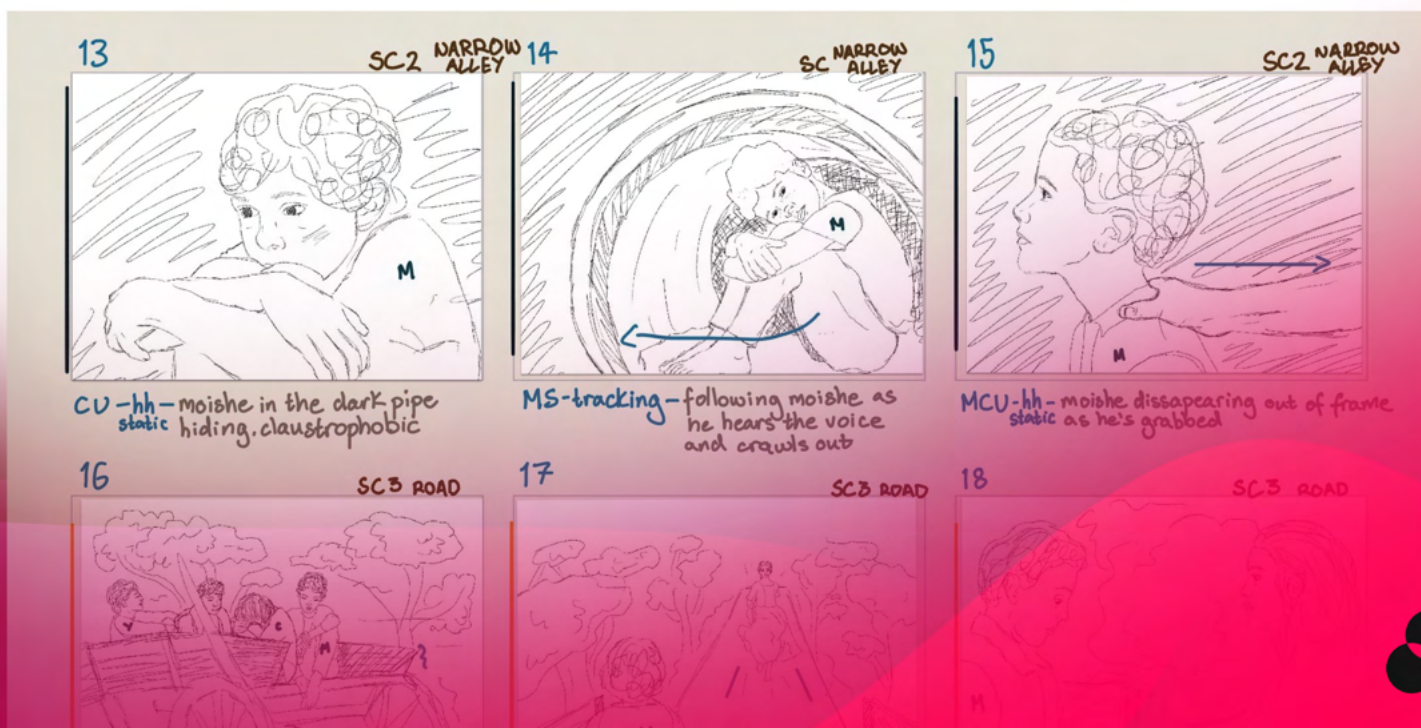
So what has Maya learned about filmmaking from Moishe so far?

COLLABORATION IS EVERYTHING: This might sound obvious, but forging creative collaborations and sharing a vision becomes all the more essential when the budget is tight. You need to know your team is around you for a purpose, not just a paycheck.

DELEGATION, DELEGATION, DELEGATION: Relinquishing control can be scary for first-time directors and people whose projects are as personal as Maya's. But it's the only way to make progress: **"THEY'LL PROBABLY DO A BETTER JOB THAN YOU WILL!"**

TRUSTING YOURSELF: If you can't believe in yourself, you can't expect other people to either. **"EVERYTHING WITH IMPOSTER SYNDROME WILL GET EASIER,"** Maya believes. And you need to relish the moments of pride. **"WE HAD A REHEARSAL LAST SUNDAY, WITH A ROOM FULL OF PEOPLE, AND I REALIZED 'EVERYONE IS HERE BECAUSE OF MY SCRIPT... WOW, SO IT MUST BE GOOD!'"**

We can't wait to see just how good Moishe turns out to be.





FOLLOW THE REST OF MOISHE'S STORY VIA THEIR KICKSTARTER PAGE

@_MAYAKATHERINE_

@MOISHEFILM

and watch out for **FILMWORKZ'S** next interview with
Maya Katherine coming later this year

Filmworkz exists to help creators like Maya

CREATE INCREDIBLE

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looking for other incredible creators to profile, sharing their tips,
tales, and tangents from up and down the knowledge ladder

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