



OnFilm Interviews

[Print](#) | [Close](#)

Brett Ratner

"I've been a dreamer and a storyteller since I was a boy. I loved telling stories to my family to get their reactions. I directed about a hundred music videos at the beginning of my career, and experimented with different types of lenses, film and lighting. That taught me each decision makes a difference. I also learned that neither instincts nor style can be taught or bought. Just like Stravinsky was born to be a composer, some people are meant to be filmmakers and every one of us is different. I love feeling challenged and directing films where the actors breathe life into their characters and make them feel like real human beings. Casting is one of the most important things I do, and that includes the cinematographer, production designer and rest of the crew as well as the actors. Every one of them has answers to pieces of the puzzle. My goal is to make every film I direct better than the last one. If you don't challenge yourself, no one else is going to do it for you."

Brett Ratner began his career directing hundreds of music videos after graduating from film school at New York University. His narrative credits include *Money Talks*, *Rush Hour*, *The Family Man*, *Rush Hour 2*, *Red Dragon* and the upcoming *After the Sunset*.

QUESTION: What was your first connection to filmmaking?

RATNER: I got a gift of a Super 8 mm camera from a family friend when I was eight years old. I shot films after school every day. The actors were my friends and family. I shot hundreds of Super 8 films before I went to college. I even convinced an American history teacher to let me shoot a film instead of taking a test.

QUESTION: When did you decide to make this your life's work?

RATNER: I saw *Raging Bull* when I was 11, and it blew me away. I decided I wanted to be a director like Martin Scorsese. I heard that he went to NYU (New York University) and decided that was where I was going to film school. Once I made that decision, I wanted it to happen as fast as possible. I normally would have graduated from high school when I was 18, but I convinced my mom on two separate occasions to help me skip grades. I graduated from high school in Miami Beach, Florida, when I was 16 and applied to NYU. The problem was that my grades weren't good enough, because all I did was shoot film. My counselor at school suggested that I go to NYU for an interview and show them my films. I thought I could charm my way in, but the woman who interviewed me said I needed a 4.0 grade point average. I kept telling her my briefcase was filled with my films and I had brought a Super 8 projector with me so I could show them to her.

QUESTION: What did she say?

RATNER: She told me to go to a community college and get straight A's for two years, and then maybe they would consider me again. I was devastated. As I was walking out, I thought my life was over. I was never going to become a director like Scorsese. Then, something came over me, I went to the dean's office and I told the secretary, I've got to see the dean. She asked me if I had an appointment. I said no, and she told me to come back in three months. I said, you don't understand, this is life or death. She must have liked me because she said, Okay, he's coming out of a meeting in a few minutes. You have two minutes with him.



Photo by:
Douglas Kirkland

QUESTION: What did you tell the dean?

RATNER: I told him that I had been dreaming about making movies for my entire life. I said, if you don't let me in I'm probably going to be living on my mom's couch for the rest of my life. He told his secretary to get my file on his desk the next morning. Three weeks later I got a letter that said I was accepted into NYU Film School.

QUESTION: Do you remember the name of the dean?

RATNER: Dean David Oppenheim. It was a defining moment in my life.

QUESTION: Go back to that moment in time. Most people would have walked away. What was it that made you take that extra step and ask to see the dean?

RATNER: I think perseverance is the simple answer to your question. Jackie Chan said, 'Brett is the luckiest son of a bitch I ever met.' I agree, but I think luck happens when opportunity meets preparation. There were many more talented students when I was at NYU. Some of my classmates made films that literally made me want to quit. Most of those people are probably working in some other profession today. They had raw, natural talent but lacked the passion. Film school teaches you how to make movies. What they don't teach is how to get a job. Some people just aren't driven. I felt that I had nothing to lose, so I was fearless. You need that attitude to succeed in anything you do. I think the most important thing is that you have to love what you do.

QUESTION: Going back to your childhood in Miami, what were some of the films and who were the directors whose work influenced you?

RATNER: The movies I watched over and over again were the Eddie Murphy films, the buddy-action-comic genre movies, *48 Hours* and *Beverly Hills Cop*. Later, I discovered *Freebie and the Bean* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*-movies that were before my generation. Hal Ashby is my favorite director because he made fantastic films about people and their relationships. My favorite movie of all time is *Being There*.

QUESTION: What were your student years like at NYU?

RATNER: I wasn't really considered an artist by the other students. I was the guy in school who was doing commercial, mainstream films designed to entertain people and make them laugh. A lot of the other students were making abstract films on color reversal or black-and-white film without sound. I was making 16 mm films on color negative with synch sound. I'm obsessed with reversal film though. I think it's the most beautiful look, but I realized they don't use it on feature films, so I wanted to shoot negative.

QUESTION: Who were the people who influenced you at NYU?

RATNER: Professor Knebel was a cinematographer who shot documentaries in the 1960s and '70s. He taught an intermediate production class. I took his class over and over again for two or three semesters, because every day in his class was different. He was teaching us from his personal experiences rather than from books. I wrote the script for my narrative thesis film. He called me at eleven o'clock the night before I was supposed to shoot. I was getting ready for bed. I was really nervous and stressed out. I told him that I had to get up at 4:30 in the morning. He said, come to my house. I re-read your script and it's not funny. I said, 'What are you talking about? You're from Poland and don't even speak proper English.' You don't know what's funny. He said you have to rewrite it. I went to his house, sat at his desk and rewrote the script. I realized years later that he was preparing me for my future. He didn't want me to do a comedy with a lot of glitz. He said the way to learn to be a director was to get one actor alone in a room and tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end.

QUESTION: How did that prepare you for the future?

RATNER: When I came on the set for the first time for my first movie (*Money Talks* in 1997), we had a \$20 million budget. Charlie Sheen and Chris Tucker were the stars. They told me, 'Brett, this scene doesn't work.' I re-read the scene and told them they were right, it doesn't make sense. There were 100 people on my crew and it was costing something like \$200,000 a day, but I sat down and rewrote that scene, and then we shot it. My professor forcing me to rewrite the script under pressure prepared me for that moment!

QUESTION: Coming from Miami, what were your impressions of New York?

RATNER: It was the greatest place in the world to be a film student, because there was always something interesting to film-either a texture of a building, or a great face-in any direction you pointed the camera. One of my great experiences was when we shot *The Family Man* in New York (in 2000) with (cinematographer) Dante Spinotti (ASC, AIC), because I felt like I was a kid again. We shot across the street from my old dorm, where I made all my little student films. It was a wonderful experience.

QUESTION: Did you take advantage of all the cinemas in New York?

RATNER: Let me tell you what my scam was. I looked like I was 14 years old when I was 18. I went to the movie and looked at the poster for the director's name. Then I told the head usher, I'm Brett Spielberg or Brett Friedkin. The director is my uncle. I never waited on those long lines. They would take me right in.



Brett Ratner (photo by Douglas Kirkland)

called looking for you.' My first thought was that either my mom or one of my friends called and pretended to be Steven Spielberg. The dean gave me a phone number, so I went back to my dorm and called the number. It was Steven Spielberg's office. They said, he was expecting my call. My heart was palpitating. They said he was going to call me back. I waited the whole night, thinking he's going to call. I fell asleep on top of the phone. When I woke up in the morning, Kathleen Kennedy called. She said Steven (Spielberg) was impressed with my film, but they don't give students money to finish their projects. I kept her on the phone for 10 minutes, and I felt good about that. I wasn't asking for money. I just wanted the relationship. A month went by and I got a check in the mail from Amblin Entertainment. I blew up a copy and put it on my dorm wall, and I carried that check in my wallet for years, and showed it to girls to impress them.

QUESTION: Have you ever told Steven Spielberg that story?

RATNER: Years later, when I was directing music videos, Quincy Jones took me to a party where I was introduced to Steven Spielberg. He asked if I went to film school, and I told him the story. We spoke for hours.

QUESTION: How did you get into music videos?

RATNER: I never planned to be a music video director. I admired Hal Ashby, Martin Scorsese, Ethan and Joel Coen and Spike Lee, the latter who made their first features with their credit cards. What happened was that I met Russell Simmons who started Def Jam. I showed him my short film and he screened it for this group of rappers. One of them wanted me to do their next video. I was thinking, I'm going to get paid to learn. The first video I directed was budgeted for \$30,000. The second one had a \$50,000 budget, and then it climbed to \$80,000 and \$100,000, until finally I was directing multi-million dollar music videos. When I was shooting in film school, a wheelchair was my dolly and I had a 16 mm ARRI SR camera with three lenses. Suddenly, I was directing videos using 35 mm film, Steadicams, real dollies and a crane. That's when I started understanding how to use these tools to tell stories. I was also working with talented young

cinematographers, including Aaron Schneider (ASC), Lance Acord (ASC) and Mark Reshovsky (ASC). I was working with a different guy every time because I learned new things from all of them.

QUESTION: Did you start doing videos after graduating from NYU?

RATNER: Yes, right after I graduated. I was getting paid to learn. It was great experience because you could experiment and try anything. I was always trying to tell a story with a beginning, middle and end. I figured out all those things they don't necessarily teach you in film school, like how to make the eyelines correct, but I was developing my own way of telling stories.

QUESTION: How did you make the transition to movies?

RATNER: My first chance came when a William Morris agent saw my short film at NYU and wanted to sign me. I told her I wasn't ready to make a movie. I did around 100 music videos first, and learned what you can do with different lenses, types of lighting and films stocks. I also learned what different people on my crews did, including the cinematographer, gaffer, AC grips, and electric. For instance in film school I never had a grip because I never had a dolly. And the gaffer and grip and AC were one person. I want people working on my sets to feel they are part of the creative process. I'll ask the PA, what do you think of this idea.

QUESTION: How did you get your first movie?

RATNER: I had done a music video with Chris Tucker that became one of the biggest video on MTV at the time. He went on to do a couple of movies, and was getting ready to act in a film called *Money Talks*. They lost the director about a week before they were scheduled to start shooting. He suggested me to the studio and I came onto that film with one week of prep time. I wasn't scared because there was nothing to lose, and I didn't know what the consequences were because I had never made a film before. Russell Carpenter (ASC) was the cinematographer. We had a huge crew, miles of cable and we lit the entire Los Angeles Coliseum. I was completely fearless. The producer asked me how many cameras we needed. I said nine. I trusted my instinct and covered the coliseum from every angle. One thing I've learned is that neither instincts nor style can be taught or bought and there is no right or wrong. When I saw the film for the first time in front of an audience, whenever I wanted people to laugh, they laughed. Every detail was important, including the choice of lenses, camera angles and lighting.

QUESTION: Did it get easier after you cleared that first hurdle?

RATNER: No, you are always discovering something new. When I directed *Family Man* there were scenes where I wanted people to cry. I didn't know if I could do it because I never did it before. In *Red Dragon*, there are times where we wanted the audience to be scared. When I screen my film, I always sit right in the middle of the audience, and look around to see if people are giving the reaction I wanted from them. For example, if they are laughing and I want them to be scared it might be a problem. The people in this industry are terrific and very supportive. After *Rush Hour*, I got the opportunity to meet Jonathan Demme, Warren Beatty and Roman Polanski and they all had great things to say about my film.

QUESTION: That must have been an amazing experience.

RATNER: It was incredible. I said there's no way I'm meeting Roman Polanski. He told me to call him when I came to Paris. I went to Paris and called. He left a message saying I should meet him for lunch at a restaurant. I bought every Polanski movie poster I could find and asked him to sign them. This was way before he directed *The Pianist*. I told him I had a scene in *Rush Hour* where I couldn't figure out where to put the camera. He told me to draw the scene. He showed me how he would have covered the scene, which was entirely different from the way I did it. Then, he asked me to show him what I did. He told me that my way worked as well. I realized there is no right or wrong way to shoot a scene. There are certain technical rules, such as not crossing the line. Polanski told me to think of myself as the camera with my eyes being the lens. He also said the distance you put the camera from the subject was very important dependent on the shot that you wanted. I told him I loved the way his actors breathe life into their characters and made them feel like real human beings in *The Tenant* and *Chinatown*. I can also say that about any Hal Ashby movie.

QUESTION: Please give us an example.

RATNER: In *Rush Hour* I shot a scene where Chris Tucker is trying to talk his way into an art exhibit and I used a really long lens from across the street to shoot the scene. Later, I realized the camera should have

been closer to the actors because it was an intimate moment between him and the doorman. For instance, Polanski's example of the camera distance from the subject made sense. The shot was too distant. It didn't feel right. What had happened was that all my other movies were anamorphic. I struggled on my new movie because it was Super 35 and I had to make adjustments for depth of field because all my other films have been shot in anamorphic, and I got to use to the anamorphic lenses. Regardless of the format, each lens feels different and has its own feel or even personality.

QUESTION: Do you believe the audiences reacts to those nuances?

RATNER: I believe every film should speak a common language for all generations and people in all walks of life everywhere in the world. That's why it is so exciting to be a filmmaker today. I feel blessed. The audience might not recognize that the director has done his or her job or that the composition is important. It happens on a subliminal level. It's takes a lot of things coming together, including the actors and lighting that helps tell the story. Part of it is the director is communicating with the actors how he wants to tell the story and what the tone of the film is. It's all those pieces of the puzzle coming together including the wardrobe and even the colors of walls in the background. I love films that show true relationships that affect people. Maybe the audience can relate with a character in a movie and it will affect certain choices they make in their own lives. I get letters from people who tell me that has happened to them, and it makes me feel great about my work.

QUESTION: What is it that you like about anamorphic movies?

RATNER: I see the world in wide screen. The most painful thing in the world for me is when they pan and scan versions of my movies for televisions.

QUESTION: Have you ever seen a perfect movie?

RATNER: Brian DePalma's *Scarface*. I can't find one flaw in that film; not even in the wardrobe or a prop or the way the characters wore their hair. Every choice was perfect.

QUESTION: Directing a film is a big commitment. How do you choose projects?

RATNER: I've read great scripts that I said no to because I couldn't relate with the story or the character. I've got to be able to bring something of myself to the film. It starts with the writers, but I have to see how I can infuse myself into it. I also make choices based on challenges. I recently finished a film, *After the Sunset*, a heist movie that should have been a simple script to shoot with no action and mostly dialogue. But it was one of the hardest things I've ever done because of the film's complex tones. It has elements of three different genres. I tend to pick movies like that - movies that have more than one genre. For example, *Rush Hour* was a comedy and an action movie. You have to walk very fine line in deciding the tone.

QUESTION: Do you see a movie in your mind before you actually direct it?

RATNER: Sometimes I see very clearly and other times, I have no clue as to what I want to do. I try to pre-visualize and create storyboards, but sometimes I don't want to get locked into how we are going to shoot a scene. I'm not fearless any more like I was on the first one. Every movie I direct becomes more and more scary. In my opinion, casting is the second most important thing job of a director. Picking the right script is first. I'm not talking just about casting the actors. You also have to cast the right director of photography, the right costume designer, the right production designer, and everyone else on the crew who is helping you create the look. If you give the same script to 10 different directors, they'll cast it 10 different ways and make 10 very different films.

QUESTION: What do you look for in a cinematographer? For instance, why did you cast Dante Spinotti to shoot *After the Sunset*?

RATNER: I look for someone who is going to bring something to the project as a storyteller. Dante combines an old school sensibility with a hipness that serves the story.

QUESTION: How did you communicate with him in the beginning of *After the Sunset*, when it was in pre-production? How did he fathom what was in your mind?

RATNER: We looked at some films together. Dante likes to find the language of the film, which is somewhat of an intellectual statement. If you ask me what that means, I couldn't tell you. It's something you have to

discover. It's the rules you make up for that film, for instance, the choice of not using more than two colors in a scene. Once you define the overall language of the film, you don't even have to talk about it anymore. It's an unspoken understanding.

QUESTION: How does that work while you are actually shooting?

RATNER: This was our third film together, so he knows how I think and my taste level. Sometimes Dante would tell me he was going to try something different, and I would ask him questions so I could wrap my mind around it. Lighting has to be justified for me. For instance, what is the source of the light in the scene? He says, trust me and I do because everything Dante does is designed to serve the story.

QUESTION: Do you still occasionally do music videos?

RATNER: If I'm offered one that appeals to me in between movies I'll say yes. I'll come up with an idea, tell them my idea for a particular song and they either say yes or no. If they say yes, then I'm able to experiment. If you watch my music videos, they are more like mini movies than they are traditional videos.

QUESTION: Are there film genres you look forward to doing in the future?

RATNER: I had to fight for a chance to direct *Family Man* for a year. I think that opened the door for me to do different types of films. I've been lucky because I haven't been pigeonholed and have been able to move from genre to genre. I'd love to do a musical. If you don't challenge yourself, no one else is going to do it for you.

QUESTION: How do you answer younger and aspiring filmmakers when they ask you to reveal the secret of success?

RATNER: I tell them perseverance is important. Never give up. That's the most important thing. If you give up, you are never going to know if you could have made it. If you make 80 or 100 short films, music videos or commercials and no one has recognized your work, maybe it's time to quit; but otherwise keep going. My goal is that I want every film to be better than the last one. You also have to choose your battles. That's very important. You can't fight everything because then nobody wants to work with you. You have to be somewhat political and figure out how to get along with everyone and fight for what's important.

QUESTION: Do you think people are born to do this work?

RATNER: I really believe that just like Stravinsky was born to be a composer, people are born to be filmmakers.