



Episode 611: How Libertarians Can Stop Getting Trounced

Guest: Patrick Reasonover

WOODS: I want you to tell me all about your organization in 60 seconds (laughing), or at least tell me what the aim of it is, and then I want to talk about Michael Malice for a minute.

REASONOVER: Okay, fantastic; I'll do the best I can. Our organization is called Taliesin Nexus. What we do is if you are interested and passionate about the ideas of liberty, free markets, and individual rights and you want to work in entertainment – you're a storyteller or filmmaker – we have programs to help you do that. We have workshops, internships, a film lab for prospective fiction writers, narrative nonfiction writers, screenwriters, producers, directors, folks who want to work in the entertainment business and are interested in storytelling.

WOODS: Now, that is obviously very important. I'll hold off on poor Michael Malice for a minute. But that's very important, because libertarians just generally haven't been all that good at this stuff, and either we're not doing it at all – I mean, we're great at producing economists, and there's nothing wrong with that. We need economists. And we're great at producing papers on a lot of subjects. But when it comes to this, either we are just not in the game, or it's terrible. People think, it's enough that it's a libertarian movie, so you should go out and like it, and I have seen people – I can't mention names – who have produced libertarian material of this sort, and then they come to me, and they want me to promote it on my show, and it puts me in a very awkward position, because I don't want to have to say, to quote the name of a Roger Ebert book, "You're movie sucks."

REASONOVER: (laughing)

WOODS: You know, I don't want to have to say that. Actually wrote a whole book called that. That is a whole book by Roger Ebert. You know, it's too bad. And the same thing goes for, as I've said before, so-called Christian movies. They think, well, the Christians will come out and see it, because it's a Christian movie. But it's a lot of sentimental schlock. Because it's a – part of the reason that regular movies I think do well is they just set out to be movies. They don't set out to be a libertarian movie, a Christian – they just set out to be a good movie, and unfortunately we just haven't got that.

REASONOVER: That's right, and I think there's two key reasons. One, making a film is a collaborative art. It's not something like writing a novel where you can just sit down in front of your computer and do it by yourself. And it's also a business, and so it's complicated, and what you really need are people who are experienced and know what they're doing and who have produced movies before and written scripts and had them produced and who know all elements of the ballgame. And so I think, whereas in the public policy space and academia there's a lot of resources and there's a network there for people to go and pursue that career and have people help them and guide them in, you know, this is the right way to write a policy paper, in the entertainment space we just haven't had the network. And so our organization is devoted to building that and making it a resource for folks who want to come in, so they can get the experience to share the ideas and can help make a great product.

The second reason I think that these movies tend to suck is people go about trying to make a libertarian movie or a Christian movie, per se, rather than, you know, if you look at it from a public policy standpoint and you're working on a white paper or an academic paper, you don't set about saying, well, I want to get libertarian ideas in here, so I'll write a paper in here as a vehicle to get libertarian ideas out there. Rather, the honest scholar is pursuing truth in that form, and they're doing their absolute best, be it an empirical study or from an analytical standpoint, examining reason and logic. You know, they're letting truth be their guide, and I think that's a big failing when people try to make a libertarian or conservative or Christian film. If you hold those values and those ideas and you are intellectually honest, they're going to come through.

You really just need to concentrate on making a movie that, if it's a horror, it scares people. If it's a comedy, they're laughing. And if it's a thriller, they're on the edge of their seat. That's the number one thing when you're making a movie. It's who's my audience, and what do they want to watch, and I want to entertain them, and you just have to really trust your instincts and work with people who are experienced to help you understand how the values come through. That's the second part of it, and I think too often folks enter in to making a movie as a vehicle to get their ideas out there, and that's not going to create great movies; that's going to create propaganda, the opposite of what we want.

WOODS: Can you explain to me the meaning behind the name of your organization?

REASONOVER: Sure. Taliesin was the name of a 4th century Welsh bard, apocryphally known as the father of storytelling. He's also apocryphally known as the father of Merlin the wizard. So we have storytelling magic. Basically movie magic and storytelling (laughing). So Taliesin is kind of a founding father in that sense. If you look on our programs, you'll see that we have the Odysseus Fellowship and the Apollo Workshop for Film & Television –

WOODS: Now it makes sense. Okay.

REASONOVER: Yeah, because we want to create a new tradition, rather than have it be the Hayek this or the Mises that or the Rand this, you know, we want to hark back to what's at the base of storytelling, which is myth and epic tales, what's kind of fundamental to human nature, and we want folks who are interested in creating content that has the ideas in there but are great stories, to kind of hark back to those models and that type of thinking as a place to generate, to be your muse to generate the great stories that we know that they can tell.

WOODS: Now, even though I said that a lot of times the trouble with people who want to make ideological movies making a statement is that they're kind of defeating the purpose of entertainment, because people don't really want to be bashed over the head with a really, really obvious message. At the same time, it is obvious that plenty of movies coming out of Hollywood have a message embedded in them, and it's generally a leftist kind of message. Now, in what you're doing I suppose you are very alert to this, and you note that there are certain leftist ideas that do slip into entertainment. And you must at some level think about what alternatives would be. So the Left produces such and such type movie; what's a movie that we can produce in response – is that the way you think sometimes?

REASONOVER: Actually, no. I mean, yes and no. On the one hand, I'm not the sort who kind of thinks that Hollywood is nefarious or that they're plotting some total social change agenda. I think that it just so happens that there are a lot of people who work in Hollywood who share those values. And while some may be trying to stick messages in, I mean, I think that when they take that approach, often the movie fails. It doesn't hit a wide audience, because, in the same way that a libertarian would try to make a libertarian movie, if a progressive tries to make a progressive movie, we don't tend to see those do well at the box office, because people don't like that. I think that's the wrong way to go about expressing the ideas, trying to put an analytical argument or something in the movie, because when you encounter that in a movie, it rips you out. I want an immersive experience where I can follow characters and go along with them on their journey. I don't want to hit pause on that and do a logical argument in my head after I hear some position said.

WOODS: Right.

REASONOVER: And I think the best movies, even from someone coming from a progressive background, is when they're intellectually honest and they're trying to express what they truly believe about the world in their narratives. And I think that the solution isn't necessarily to say, okay, let's come out with another film that attacks the argument of that film. I think the solution is more that we simply support and help more people who have passion for the ideas like we do pursue their career, and that if they proceed intellectually honestly and are led by their muse and imagination, they're going to create great works that people will be drawn to.

And so we don't need to get in a fight as you might in a debate, kind of like an analytical or empirical state. You know, we're in the realm of the imagination and narrative, so it's really just what's most compelling. You know, you can look at two

films and what's most compelling and what speaks to you, and if we're right about our ideas, which I think we are, then I think that our ideas shown in that way will speak to people, and they'll be drawn to it and want to consume it, which is what we want. We want content that people want to consume that moves them and opens their eyes to different perspectives and experiences.

WOODS: Of course I wouldn't support something as crude as coming out with an express reply to another movie, but there are themes – or let's say, a lot of times there are simply omissions that come out of Hollywood that are just crying out to be addressed. So for instance, I was just talking to Lew Rockwell about this, that the number of movies I can think of that deal with the crimes of communism – I mean, we're talking about potentially 100 million deaths, depending on how you count it – I can count on one hand. I mean, I know *The Killing Fields* in Cambodia –

REASONOVER: Yeah, that's a great movie.

WOODS: – but I really don't know a whole lot – yeah, there's just almost nothing about that. So you have a whole generation of kids who, given that they don't learn much in school, they know nothing about what occurred. And there are some things in history that some people would say it would be terrible if people were not educated about such and such occurrence. No one seems to think that way about the crimes of communism. Nothing's done about that. I would love to see – I mean, could you imagine the movies that could be made about this, on so many levels, so many fascinating characters, so many extraordinary events. And yet, nothing. Absolute silence. I would like to see somebody film that particular gap.

REASONOVER: I think that, you know, part of our mission, our organization we're trying to do is identify filmmakers who share the ideas, and they're going to learn how to actually produce great content that's entertaining. And so what you'll find, just as we find in the public policy space, are great minds, once trained in the arts, go and discover new things about liberty and economics and human nature we'll see that same approach happen as we build talent in the entertainment space. You know, there's one film which I think is just fantastic. One of our filmmakers who just did finished our programs has produced a great short, and I know he's interested in doing a feature. I'll send it your way, but it details how Stalin's starved out the Ukrainians, and it's basically a horror story, where you have people in the Ukraine, and they're producing the wheat, it goes away, the train comes in, they have bread, and then suddenly the trains stop coming, and they don't have an explanation for why. And then they literally just start starving to death. And you know, I think there are novels that detail this, these kinds of things, and you know, I think framed as a horror story yet true is really sexy, interesting –

WOODS: Yeah.

REASONOVER: – I mean, it's not sexy; it's very sad and terrible –

WOODS: Yeah, I know what you mean.

REASONOVER: But it's something that would garner the attention of the public. It's put in a framework that they would want to consume. And so I definitely think that as we see more folks moving into the space who are talented in the art and they develop it, those stories will be told, and they definitely need to be, because we have candidates running who are talking about socialism as though it's great (laughing), and young people listening to this, which they just do not have a context for the history. They don't know anything about it. Maybe they're not willing to read and learn about the history, but hopefully that's a role that we can play in the popular culture by investing in talent and getting people who can develop those movie ideas so that the younger generation that's maybe not willing to delve as deeply into the history of the ideas can consume something like that and have their eyes opened.

WOODS: All right, suppose I have an aspiring filmmaker, and I've got an idea, and I come to you. What can you do for me? Or let me ask also this: What would I need to have already before you could do anything for me?

REASONOVER: Well, what I'll do is kind of chart a path for how a filmmaker can proceed through our organization and our program. First off, you've got to look at who you are and your background and what you're bringing to the table. Like I mentioned earlier, film's a collaborative art, so you don't need to be a great producer and a great screenwriter and a great director. Most likely what you're going to want to do is learn about the industry, pick out areas, something that you're drawn to – be that cinematography or editing or writing – and then you can apply to our Apollo Film & Television Workshop. And when you get there you can pitch your idea, and you'll be pitching your idea to entertainment industry pros who can give you instant feedback. You know, they're pitching every day to production companies and studios, and they can give you critical feedback, but then also help you by giving you suggestions, because they're screenwriters. And so they can help you shape your idea.

The other thing you get in our workshop is we have 24 participants, and we have 24 faculty members, because the network is very important when you're in the entertainment space. And so what we would want young filmmakers to do is they come in, pitch your idea, get feedback, develop it, share your ideas with everyone, don't be afraid someone's going to steal your killer idea – the chances of you have a killer idea that someone would want to steal are pretty low. You know, you think you have a good idea; so does everybody else, and they're interested in their own idea, not yours usually. And the way ideas get better in a collaborative art is through collaboration. So you share, work with other people, build your network, learn from those who have gone before and know what's happening in the industry today, and then help you plan your career so you can make good decisions as to what you need to be doing in the space.

Then the next step, we have an internship program where you can – we have a paid internship program where you can intern with production companies out here, studios. The interns, we usually try to make it targeted to your interests, so once you kind of know the direction that you're interested in heading in, your internship is going to reflect that.

And then the next step in the process is we have a film lab, where you apply with a partner with a treatment for a short film – narrative, not doc, so it would be comedy, drama, thriller, sci-fi, in that vein – that explores the ideas of liberty. And if selected, the team will get a roughly \$10,000 grant, as well as an opportunity to develop out a script and a budget, that we potentially would invest more, up to about 15,000, and they can go and over a 120-day period make a great short film. It can be a calling card for you as a director or a writer that can be something that you can put in front of theaters or a feature film. Ultimately it's an experience that helps you understand completely how the industry works and give you the opportunity to work on a project.

But kind of the most important element of that program is that we have a mentor who can work with you who's a professional screenwriter, has been in the business for years – or a professional producer or director that's been in the business for years, worked on many films. And our mentors give notes on all of the script drafts. They help mentor them through production, pre-production, lining up your talent, and also give notes on the post-production, like when the film is being cut. We then screen those films in Los Angeles, New York – we just came back from the New York screening actually – San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.

And then our filmmakers, it's very important to us, because we support creatives, they own the content 100%, so if they choose to go and pursue a feature film or to use the content at College Humor or Funny or Die or elsewhere to get it out there through those vehicles, then that's wonderful. If not, then we help them push the film out, and that includes like a stipend for submitting to film festivals and that sort of thing. So big picture, if you're a young filmmaker and you're interested in the business, I would just suggest applying to our workshop. It's our first tier in our programs, and we'd love to connect with you.

WOODS: Well, this is very exciting. I didn't know about your organization, even though I knew you a little bit. I didn't know about your organization until Michael Malice came back from having apparently emceed an event for you in January, and he just could not say enough about what a great organization it was, so that put it on my radar, and I said we've got to talk to you about it. I wonder if you can – given that Michael's been a controversial guest on the show, he's a regular guest, and he and I had a big debate in New York City about Alexander Hamilton that was a lot of fun – anything about working with Michael Malice you can tell me about?

REASONOVER: Yeah, well, Michael was great. He came out to the L.A. premier of our short films this year. So it was a wonderful event, had about 200 people there, and we screened several films, and he kind of opened the show. And I think Michael and I, where we kind of really saw we were both mutually agreed is the kind of mantra of our organization, which is something that Andrew Breitbart once said. It's that politics is downstream of culture, and so for generations, decades, Friends of Liberty have invested in policy papers and books and nonprofit organizations to do policy and programs for journalism, programs for academia to support professors who are interested in examining these ideas at university settings, but have not invested in the culture. And my view is that what we see is that – and it's part of a frustration I know

– is that these downstream efforts are being washed out by an upstream cultural engine that largely is the antithesis of those ideas. And so by the time we get downstream, we're just not seeing those policies and those ideas being effective.

And so part of what our organization wants to do is give filmmakers who share our passion for these ideas an opportunity to explore them, challenge them in a narrative setting. And as we see more and more of this, they will put wind in the sails of the folks who are operating and doing great work in the public policy tier. They suddenly won't have to fight against the culture; they'll have allies there, and so they'll be able to point to narratives that are compelling.

Let me give you an example. So the film *Dallas Buyers Club*. Now, I don't know who was behind that or what ideas they had, but this is a film starring Matthew McConaughey where we see how the FDA and the FDA's rules are preventing Matthew McConaughey, who's this entrepreneur who's getting these AIDS drugs from Mexico for his own use, because he gets AIDS, and he doesn't necessarily like the homosexual community where this is a problem; he's not a part of that. But he then kind of sees a business opportunity. Like, I need these drugs; these people need these drugs. And we see how a market need brings this guy, who's kind of a bigot against homosexuals to then see, hey, these people are people like me, and they have this need, and the FDA is cracking down on him and his business and is trying to prevent him from selling these drugs to people who want them.

And so at the Goldwater Institute, they have a "Right to Try" piece of legislation, which basically says if you have a terminal illness, you have a right to try a drug that could potentially save you, and the state – this is a state law – the state will protect you against the federal government where the FDA is barring you to use it. And so what they actually found is that as they were marketing this bill and this change, that people were kind of just adopting it as, oh, this is the "*Dallas Buyers Club*" bill, because that was a way for them to instantly understand it, and they instantly know the things that the characters were going through in that movie. It's wrong when you're facing a terminal illness and you can't get drugs that could potentially help you. Maybe they won't help you, but you want to try. And so that's a great example where we can see the culture putting wind in the sails of people doing policy work that frees people. And so that's ultimately how I think Michael and I connected, just over that idea that politics is downstream of culture. And I know in his work – for instance, his book on North Korean leader, that's very much in his mind too.

WOODS: Can you tell me about any other short films that stand out to you that you guys have had a hand in?

REASONOVER: Absolutely. Our program is entering its third year, so we've had 11 short films that have been produced so far, and this year we plan to do 12, so we're doubling the size of it. But the filmmakers in our program have done just a great job. One of the films, one of the directors is Daniel Hanna, and it's called *Shelter*, stars Clea DuVall. And it's kind of one that you would look at, perhaps, and watch and think

maybe this – you know, where is the liberty? You know, if you're looking for someone to be having an argument in the middle of the film.

But we really feel that it's a great thematic approach, where in it, you have a woman, Clea DuVall, who, there was a drunk and disorderly and she bit a cop, and then she wound up with a felony, and she's on work release when we enter the short film. And we see that she goes to this dog shelter, and at the dog shelter, her eyes are kind of opened. There's this tierage, you know, there's the unadoptable dogs, and then there are the dogs that they adopt away. And the unadoptable dogs, they just kill. And so she develops a relationship with this scarred up little black dog, and I won't ruin the end of it, but basically she's sort of faced with this dilemma of, do I help this dog escape, and what does that mean for me. And the cinematography, we see the dog behind bars, and we see the camera from the other side with her behind bars. And what we were kind of going for with the film is just to highlight the criminal justice reform that is needed, where we have folks who have a drug felony for possession, and then they're not able to get a job. When they get out, they've done their time, they're not able to kind of reenter the economy, and so in this film we're kind of making that point through the connection to what's going on in animal shelters.

And so it's a great film, and I'll have to let you know how to see it. A lot of the films are on the film festival circuit and haven't been released yet, so what I can do for your listeners and for you is to send you some links to the films that are available now, and you can check them out. And I 100%, Tom, would want you to watch these films, and I would hope that you would feel proud to show them and not embarrassed (laughing) –

WOODS: (laughing) Right.

REASONOVER: – as a libertarian film that you feel obligated to share, because I absolutely take your point and think that's something we shouldn't do. My view is we should not share our films because they're libertarian, because we feel an obligation; we should share films because they're good, and that's it. So we'll make these available to you and your listeners, and I hope they'll enjoy them.

WOODS: Well, I'll put them up on the show notes page, which for today is TomWoods.com/611, so that's where people will be able to find them. I also want to put your website up there. Tell us what it is, because I have a feeling after listening to you some people are going to want to contact you.

REASONOVER: Absolutely. Our web address is TalNexus.com, and our organization is Taliesin Nexus.

WOODS: Okay, so that's what we'll do there. We'll get all that information up at TomWoods.com/611. Can I ask you something? It's not totally off topic, but it's off your organization a little bit. Just before we go, I wonder if you'd be willing to give your frank and honest appraisal of – and I don't know if you know what's coming – the *Atlas Shrugged* movies.

REASONOVER: (laughing) Well, I'll be willing to say this. I think that, you know, that is a tough novel. That's a really tough novel to bring to life in one film, much less three films. And also from what I know about the nature of the production, it had an incredibly tight timeline. So when you're dealing with issues like that, it's very, very tough, you know, and I've talked to screenwriters out here who admire Ayn Rand and had said if those producers had come to me, I would have flat out told them no. Like, I don't even see how it's possible that we could make a film of that book. So I think the really true vehicle for how that book should be made is a miniseries like a Netflix show, a *Breaking Bad*, where you have a long arc for your drama. There are so many stories in there, and it's really difficult to cut them. One of my favorites is Ragnar Danneskjöld, who I'm sure would be the first on the chopping block as what should be cut in making that book into a movie. So yeah, I think and I hope and I hear that the plans are to pursue that as a long-form television show, which I think would be terrific.

The other thing that I would say – and I think there's probably a budget consideration – but what I really think is kind of magical about that book is it's set in this America that never was, where it's like the 1940s and '50s, and yet people are taking passenger trains around. You know, it's really like a science fiction, dystopian film, and so one of the things that I hope in a future iteration of it is, you know, the filmmakers really buy into that and don't make *Atlas Shrugged* in the modern day world; make it in this science fiction world, you know, like that it is, that's true to the novel. I think that that would make it so much more powerful, because it takes people out of our modern base.

And I think that one of the powers of storytelling is when you tell a story, people suspend disbelief, so if I'm telling you a ghost story, when the ghost appears, you don't say that's irrational, illogical, there can't be ghosts, this movie makes no sense and therefore I'm not going to watch it. You just buy in and say, okay, there are ghosts in this world. And I think putting *Atlas Shrugged* together in a world of its own will allow viewers, just like readers can do, to suspend disbelief, go along on the ride, consume this new world. And they'll draw the conclusions that are there. We don't need to set it in a modern context and hit them over the head with it. I think we have to trust audiences, just as Ayn Rand in writing her novel trusted audiences. You're going to read this, and you're going to enjoy it, and there are themes and ideas in there, and as you consume it, you'll think about them. And I think that's the approach.

WOODS: All right, I definitely want people to check out TalNexus.com. What I love about the world these days – there's a lot not to like about it, but one thing to like about it is there's this great organization like this that's around that I didn't know about, whereas in 1972, let's say, I pretty much would have known every libertarian thing in the world, because there would have been five of them, and I would have figured them all out. But I'm so glad you're out there and that there's still more for me to discover in the world and to share with the audience, and I'm sure everybody enjoyed getting to hear about all the great things that you're doing, and I hope they'll check you out. We'll put all the links up at TomWoods.com/611. Best of luck, Patrick, and thanks for being with us today.

REASONOVER: Thank you, Tom. I absolutely appreciate the opportunity to come on your show and to let more people know about what we're doing.