

Member Spotlight: Vanessa Miles



How did you get your start in the Industry? What influenced you to enter into the Entertainment world? Life was not easy for me as a child and in my early teens. I was abused and became homeless (not by choice) for a few months when I was 14. I watched a film called *Where The Day Takes You* about homeless teens in L.A. I found out I was not alone. The film, and its soundtrack by Melissa Etheridge, made such a difference in my life. I knew I had to do something to make a change and with my grandparents' help I did. They took me in and have been loving and supportive my whole life. As a teen my grandpa and I were always trying to find the most obscure films, like Celine, Julie Go Boating, and my favorite, Metropolis. I watched everything I could get my hands on. Eventually my love for films changed into a love for making them. I want to make films that are beautiful and have the power to change lives for the better. In 2000 I got my start in the industry when I was hired as Art Director for a feature film by Joe Sweet titled *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The film had a great cast and crew, and I've become lifelong friends with many of them, several of whom will be working on my upcoming project, *Princess*.

What is your educational background? As I mentioned, my film education started long before any formal classes, with my grandfather and my mother. In high school I petitioned for the school to add a film and video class. Eventually I went to MCTC's filmmaking program where I studied with Bruce Mamer, as well as photography with Jack Mader. About 10 years later I moved to Chicago to attend Columbia College where I focused more directly on Production Design, working with Jackie Penrod and David Christopher 'Big' Krause.

What are you currently working on? I have a few films in development. Currently I am in the pre-production stage of a short film that has been with me since I was a small child. Finally after 13 years I am retelling a very important tale of vulnerability and perception, a fairy tale coming from my heart and my dark past, a childhood brutally cut short. *Princess* is a traditional

fairy tale wherein the heroine learns that growing up can be scary, but not growing up can be scarier. Its the story of a little girl not being allowed to grow up who runs away into the woods where she meets another little girl trapped as an ageless reflection. Through this production I am exploring themes of family, independence, and mortality as well as the experiencing of some of the beauty and wonder of childhood hopefully enabling others like me to share in that experience. I find fairy tales are able to incorporate both childhood and adulthood demonstrating some of the most profound moments of the human experience, transcending any “target audience age.” Its a bit of a throwback to old school film “magic” relying heavily on practical effects rather than CG to convey the story, and will be including some excellent MN talent, both in the cast and the crew.

What is your favorite story to tell about working in this industry? My favorite project would have to be working on *The Dark Knight*. The sets were so large and absolutely amazing, and I truly love practical art effects so much. Its such an honor to be able to say that I worked on a film with some of the best in the industry. And the fan girl in me loves that I got to work on something that included two of my favorite actors in Gary Oldman and Heath Ledger (though my true favorite remains Tim Roth). What can I say I like the dark movies, as demonstrated in my rather dark and not so sunshiny fairy tale.

What is your most memorable/favorite project? Over the years I have been inspired by more things than can be counted, for instance *The English Patient* had a profound impact on me as well as the works of Brian Froud, Jean Pierre Jeunet, George Melies, David Bowie, Iggy Pop, Miss Van, and even the country of Ireland. I have giant bulletin boards on the walls of my home overloaded with inspirations for imagery and ideas, but truly I find most of my inspiration in my family. My mother’s fight for life, and her views on the universe and the world. We haven’t always gotten along, but forgiveness is so important in life. Also my husband keeps me creative. He works at the Walker Art Center and occasionally is a grip on films. He is always coming up with ideas for new installations, and having someone who loves me and is able to stay positive and keep my creativity flowing is so important.

What inspires you? Travel and seeing new places. Other women who are directing and writing beautiful work. The internet made my career possible, so I’m really inspired by that and how it can connect me to audiences all over the world from my office in Minneapolis.

What are some of your hobbies and interests? I love making things of all different kinds. I do a lot of sewing, making new clothes as well as reconfiguring older things. I made a huge quilt out of old rock t-shirts. I make jewelry, dioramas, mobiles, and collages both digitally as well as the old fashioned way. I enjoy baking and inventing new cakes and cupcakes. Additionally I truly enjoy traveling, exploring new places and photographing them, though I don’t get to do it as much as I’d like. I’m a bit of a science fiction/fantasy geek and I believe I’m currently one kitty away from qualifying as a crazy cat lady.

Where do you see yourself in 5 years? In ten? In five years I will be headlong into my career as a director while still doing some production design work. By that time I should be finished or finishing up my Ireland feature, a “going home again” love story with supernatural elements, as well as the documentary I’ve been planning which looks at the mind/body disconnect in the medical community when it comes to chronic pain management and programs such as the Courage Center’s Phoenix Center which are attempting to change the way pain patients and we as a society look and deal with such things.

What advice would you offer to a young female looking to get into this industry? I would tell any young female looking to get into this industry to believe in yourself, and your story. Tell stories that matter to you, and touch you personally. Also don't sell yourself short even in the face of outside doubters, and unfortunately there are still many of those who operate in sort of an good old boys club mentality. Ask for the rate that you know you are worth, and don't undercut yourself and in so doing all other women in the business. Also, if you are working in the art department don't try showing how strong you are moving the big heavy chair by yourself, ask for help. Your back will thank you later in life. Oh, and at risk of sounding like I'm sucking up, I really do believe that getting involved in MNWIFT can be very helpful for someone young and starting out. You will get to meet some amazing and experienced women whose camaraderie can be a powerful and beautiful thing.

If you could work with anyone (dead or alive) who would it be and why? If I could work with anyone I'd love to go back and work with George Melies. He was such an innovator. Some of his tricks are still used today. I would love to see him work and how his ideas came together, not to mention getting to see the looks on the faces of the audiences from that day watching one of his films for the first time. Also I would really love to work with Jean Pierre Jeunet. I love all of his work (discounting the Alien film with Winona Ryder), and the fact that he puts Ron Perlman, who I've loved since I was little watching the *Beauty & the Beast* TV show, in pretty much everything he does. Beyond that I'd enjoy the chance to work with all of you reading this some time in the future.

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