

**Oral History Interview of
Richard Pearce**

**Interviewed by: Daniel Sanchez
August 12, 2017
Plainview, Texas**

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features Richard Pearce as he discusses the film industry and his take on his career. In this interview, Richard describes how he got started in the film industry, and the movie he directed in Plainview, Texas called *Leap of Faith*.

Length of Interview: 00:23:08

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| What he wanted to convey to the public | 11 | 00:10:08 |
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| The biggest changes he's seen in the film industry | 16 | 00:20:12 |

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Daniel Sanchez (DS):

Just jump right in to it.

Richard Pearce (RP):

Sure [Interviewer puts down recording device]

DS:

My name is Daniel Sanchez. Today's date is August the 12, 2017. I'm in Plainview, Texas at the Broadway Brew with director Richard Pearce, and Richard directed the movie *Leap of Faith* back in 1992, and segments of the film were filmed in Plainview and that's why they're having a celebration here. And Richard, first of all thank you for agreeing to do this.

RP:

Sure.

DS:

And for the record, could you state your complete legal name?

RP:

Richard Pearce.

DS:

And where and when were you born?

RP:

I was born in San Diego, California in Navel Hospital in 1943.

DS:

Okay, and for our purposes we like to flesh out the individual a little bit. So tell us about your parents, their names, where were they from, what it was like where you grew up?

RP:

My father was also named Richard, my mother was named Patsy. I grew up in Lewisville, Kentucky. I was only in San Diego briefly, because my father was in the navy. What else?

DS:

Well, so you said you were in Kentucky. What years were you in Kentucky?

RP:

Well my family lived in Kentucky from when I was about three until I left for college, and then I—my family stayed for a while longer, and then they moved on and my brothers all moved on, so we don't—there's no relatives their right now.

DS:

Okay. And you mentioned you headed off to college. As you were growing up did you have an inkling of what you wanted to do in life?

RP:

I think I did. When I was in—really young, I used to rent films from the library or borrow them from the library and look at them, and I think I went to the only film school that I knew about, which was in New York City. There was no film courses at college where I went, but I had my eye on that as something I wanted to do.

DS:

Okay. And now you're mentioning to the young man over here about preparing yourself and, you know, not to—

RP:

Well I didn't have a choice to take a film major. There wasn't no such thing as a film major.

DS:

Yeah. And so when you were in college and getting out how did you Segway into movies and—

RP:

Somebody came to where I was at college, and he was an alumnus of that college and he came and showed some films. He was a documentary filmmaker in New York, named Don Pennebaker. And he had just finished shooting a film about Bob Dylan's first English tour called *Don't Look Back*, and he—the filmmaking was very exciting, very free, very different from the kind of Hollywood movies of the 1950s and early sixties that I was aware of. And it was very exciting to me to see that films could be much more real, and much less like Hollywood movies. And so I went to him and I said—I wanted to work with him, and he had an opening so after I graduated I went right to work with him.

DS:

Wow that's a lucky break.

RP:

Yeah.

DS:

And— but I guess, you know, I've heard from so many people you know, you've got to be prepared and so I guess your life somehow it— experience it all to prepare you to take that leap?

RP:

I know I can't speak to that. I think your life is full of moments of, you know, when you take a leap, and maybe a more sensible person wouldn't. And when they work out it all looks like it was part of the plan.

DS:

Yeah. And we're doing this about *Leap of Faith* here, and that was actually about what? Your ninth or tenth movie? It was— you'd already had a few under your belt.

RP:

Yeah

DS:

And a couple of them had been about rural America. Talk about how doing those early movies prepared you for doing the one in Plainview.

RP:

Well I think it's— we're talking about the same thing. It's talking about my being drawn to subjects that are not Hollywood subjects. And so, you know I— first film, fiction film, was a story that took place right before— right after the civil war in a small textile town in the middle of nowhere. The second film was a film about a woman who was a mail-order bride to a rancher in a remote area of Wyoming. So these are not kind of traditional Hollywood urban subject matter. So, when you start doing these films, and then you get some success, then you're asked to do more of them, and so it's kind of a, it's a self-fulfilling prophesy. And so you decide to take another turn.

DS:

Well you know, and part of the decision-making is knowing what movies to accept and which ones to pass on. What was it about the script for *Leap of Faith* that made you decide that's one I want to do?

RP:

Oh that's a good question. Well, it was the fun of seeing how a faith healer— what's the behind the scenes of a faith healer. The fun of putting on a show, a tent show with gospel music, so that it became almost a musical, during that— those sections of the film. And just the idea of a faker

confronting real faith. All of these issues were— made it a kind of exciting film, an exciting script.

DS:

Did you have anything in your prior experience like seeing traveling preachers go thorough Kentucky or so forth that you kind of relied on as you were—

RP:

No, but we did research, and Steve Martin and I went to a convention of preachers, and my memory was that Steve went in disguise. The problem was the disguise was a mustache, it didn't fool anybody, and I remember him riding down in the elevator thinking he was in full disguise when we were going to go and sit in on some of these preachers, and somebody in the elevator immediately recognized him [laughs].

DS:

Well you know— and he was probably—

RP:

I'm not sure that he didn't want to be recognized.

DS:

Well, I was saying and he probably at the height of his popularity so that he has—not that easy to hide.

RP:

Yeah that's right. He wasn't, certainly wasn't wearing a beard.

DS:

[Laughs] And so what did y'all learn from that, that you incorporated into the movie?

RP:

I think it wasn't that we learned much about who's real and who's fake, because I think most of those guys that we were seeing were real. But Steve learned the choreography. Literally the rhythms, the timing, and the music of a good preacher, and was able to incorporate that into the show. And the rest we ended up trusting a man named Ricky Jay who's a historian of magic, and he was— he's fascinated by the tricks of the trade. And so he had a whole library of scams and how they work. I don't even think he's credited because he didn't need the credit, but he is the foremost expert on the history of magic in the world.

DS:

Wow. You know, and it's interesting you pick Plainview because there were tent shows that came through here like hardly settlers tent shows back in the day and also traveling preachers are big through this area. They were back in the—

RP:

Lot's of churches. Even to this day, driving around.

DS:

Yeah. And I know they would set up tents even in Lubbock, and in here, and the north—

RP:

Did you ever go to any?

DS:

Well actually, we went, was— we're in Kansas. I grew up in Kansas for a few years so—

RP:

But Kansas is where this film was supposed to take place. Did you know that? In the script it was a small town in Kansas.

DS:

Yeah and in fact I live in Garden City, Kansas so it's a little bit bigger than this, but not much. And, you know, so.

RP:

Did preachers come through?

DS:

Yeah, and in fact my grandfather was a preacher so it was like kind of in the family, we'd see— on my dad's side there's so many preachers that you can't throw a stick without hitting one.

RP:

So you grew up in the world of preachers.

DS:

Yeah. So when I went to see a movie, to me it was interesting it was about that because, you know, there's the good and the bad.

RP:

Were there the good and the bad then? You saw the good and the bad?

DS:

I think even as a young man, I could tell when somebody was, you know, just not even—

RP:

Hustling?

DS:

Yeah. When you could see a hustle.

RP:

When they wanted money.

DS:

We could see a hustle.

RP:

Well you could see a hustle, is right!

DS:

Exactly.

RP:

And it— and then when it's all about money. And so one of the things we wanted to do is to start out with a guy who's all about money and by the end have a guy who has confronted real faith and real miracle.

DS:

And you mentioned earlier about, you know, someone else had picked out Plainview. What did you think the first time you stepped foot here after it'd already been decided on.

RP:

Well, it doesn't—I don't remember first coming here looking at it as a location. And then deciding where—which piece of Plainview and which piece of Groom we would film, which scene in that—that's a time consuming process, and all those decisions have to be made before you actually set foot in the town as crew shooting a film. It's twenty-five years ago, I can't really parse out the first day that I came here.

DS:

Yeah. That is a long time ago, and several movies ago.

RP:

Yeah.

DS:

And so, when you're doing a movie like that, what is it that you want to convey to the public?

RP:

Well, the trick in this one is to feel like you're really seeing real people in a real situation, where the show is like Hollywood. The show is like, is all fake. So in a way the fun of making the film is to have it feel real and fake at the same time. So the job—the thing that brings us to Plainview is hopefully the people and the place will bring the real to a film that could look very cartoony, if we made a mistake.

DS:

You know, and part of what you had here, is you had all locations as extras. What role did they play to the movie? You just talked about the reality, but after the fact do you take those experiences and incorporated them in some—

RP:

You mean using extras in the tent show and things like that?

DS:

Well I mean like taking the interactions with them and saying, okay next time I do one in a small city I need to do this a little different or I need to tweak this.

RP:

I don't think I've done anything like this, in a small town, smallish town like this since. Yeah, so this was—I don't know if I have any lessons learned, I just feel like it becomes sort of unique for me and I'm happy to come back and think about it again, now.

DS:

Yeah in fact your mention to somebody how, you know, you going—be able to talk to some of those people that were in it then and find out from them, you know, how it affected their lives. So that's—

RP:

Or just what their memories were, what makes them smile now after twenty-five years.

DS:

Yeah. Because, you know for you it was one of many, for them it was the one, and—

RP:

Right. And for example, I haven't met him yet, but there is a man, I hope to meet him tonight if he's around for the screening, who is the stand-in for Steve Martin. And what it means to be the stand in, is—do you understand probably what that means? It means you're the guy who takes Steve Martin's place when the cameraman's doing all the lighting, and the camera moves, and all this is of being rehearsed. So Steve Martin doesn't have to stand there. But what it means is that guy, who's usually a local guy, who's about Steve Martin's height, and weight, and size, and even look, see's everything. He see's everything that goes on, because he's right at the center of the filming. So I'd love to hear his take on what it was like to be at the center of that film.

DS:

That's going to be interesting if you have a chance to talk with him. And, well, you know, I'd be remiss if I didn't bring up something that's, you know, going on in the world right now. You mentioned civil rights, and just this morning there was a big thing in Virginia. I don't know if you've had a chance to hear about it.

RP:

Yeah I did. I just heard it on the news.

DS:

And, I know you had done something about the busses, and the bus strike. Reflecting on having done that, where you see the world now, do you have any thoughts?

RP:

Yeah. Oh. [DS laughs] you asked easy questions right?

DS:

It's all idea.

RP:

Softball. Just a softball.

DS:

Yeah. What color do you like? [Laughter]

RP:

What's your favorite flavor of ice cream? We're in very difficult times, and one of the things that I'm trying to understand is when you come back to a small town like Plainview, what is the situation now, after twenty-five years for people who lived very vulnerable, are very vulnerable to weather and conditions like drought and so forth. And what is their sense of what it means to be an American? When so much is at risk and there's so little of a safety net there. Also the issue of immigration, and this is a town with a very dynamic, strong, Mexican population. I wonder how people feel about all this when they look at the news or watch television, and they hear all these people so angry about immigration. And journalists and newspaper men and women, try to go out and talk to the people who voted for Trump, and try to understand why we're where we are right now. But it's a mystery. It's still a mystery to me.

DS:

And how do you, as a filmmaker, take those mysteries and put them into works of art.

RP:

Yeah. —Boy that's a good question. I'm afraid that since the election of Donald Trump, I have just been reeling, like I—it doesn't feel like it's in a place yet where I can sort of process it and say, "Oh, I understand this, I understand this, how this happened. I can make art of it or make a film of, or write a script." I'm still just reeling. It's that—it's like nothing else I can remember in my political life.

DS:

Yeah, I think it's—a lot of us.

RP:

Yeah, Yeah. That's right

DS:

You know, you were mentioning to the young man earlier about when you walked up here it kind of seemed depressed. And I think he didn't realized what you meant as far as like, you know, the downtown looks like there's are a lot of businesses that are closed.

RP:

There's a lot—there's all—it's a familiar pattern in many small cities where people move out of the center, and they move out into the suburbs, the move out into where the shopping malls are, whenever—that's a little different. There's no suburbs and shopping malls in Plainview. The question is whether this town is going to make it.

DS:

Yeah. And then you see a building like this that's one of the—was this one of the locations originally?

RP:

Yeah.

DS:

And it's been repurposed which is, you know, even like in Lubbock our Downtown, that's the way we're redoing it. By repurposing the older buildings.

RP:

Repurposing them and, you know, younger start-ups, and young companies, it's a great way to revitalize a downtown. And it's happening all across the country. I don't know if there's any hope of it happening here. I don't know.

DS:

Yeah. And do you know if there's been any type of movie done along those lines, about talking about stimulating downtown?

RP:

What often happens is that people tell stories and there in the margins of the story, there in the context. It was a movie called *To Hell and High Water*, it was about Texas and about conditions of two brothers who end up robbing banks in order to pay their mothers mortgage off or something. So the filmmaker had to make it clear that these were dire times, and so oddly the film creates a portrait of Texas that is pretty depressed. But it's really just to support a plot decision. They want these guys to be not bank robbers, bad guys, but good guys robbing banks. So I don't know if that's going to solve anybody's problem.

DS:

No. and, you know—

RP:

I mean robbing banks is not going to solve anybody's—[laughter]

DS:

You know, and you were talking about art repeating itself and how you came here and then you had a—we had a wet season that year, and this year's the same thing, twenty-five years later you show up and its been raining more than usual.

RP:

Completely Green [DS laughs] if we would—if we'd have come to film right now I'd have looked out there and said, "Oh my god," but you know what, I would have had a tool that in my tool box. You know, CGI [**computer-generated imagery**], and I would just key the green, make it brown.

DS:

Can you talk about the [RP coughs] impact CGI has done, for your life as director?

RP:

Oh yeah its—I once spent a few years developing a project about an expedition mountain climb, in which all kinds of terrible things happen to a bunch of climbers. And we had some of the professional climbers involved, and we were looking for locations. We were going to have to shoot that film on a wall, where every actor was going to be facing going to work with, you know, literally, physically, rope to wall. Now, you know, this is—everything can be done with the green screens and tricks, you know, and—so its—the world of filmmaking has been transformed by this. And I think it's also transformed the audiences, because I think they've become kind of—they expect everything and they don't really—they think that CGI means it's no big problem to have explosions and guys look like they're burning to death and all this. And I think that what it means is everybody's a little cynical. So it's just a different kind of audience experience.

DS:

But is CGI a lot more expensive than just strapping people to a wall?

RP:

It wasn't just a matter of expense, because it's expensive to get people up on a mountain for a whole movie. It just means that it's a lot less dangerous.

DS:

Yeah, because now—I mean back then it wasn't that, it was the technology hadn't developed to the point we have now.

RP:

Right. We didn't even have the option to do that.

DS:

No, so how many years have you been directing?

RP:

About thirty-five years.

DS:

About thirty-five years. And aside from the CGI, what's some of the biggest changes you've seen?

RP:

Well every generation of filmmakers feels like—that the films have gotten bigger, and they have this expression, tent pole movies. What that means as I understand it, is that a movie is—costs so much and yet make so much, that it actually supports the economics of running a studio so that smaller movies can prosper. But in fact what it means is tent—studios make tent pole movies and they're only trying to make tent pole movies. And a lot of the smaller films have to be made by smaller companies, and there're fewer and fewer doors you can knock on with a small movie. So it's a big change.

DS:

And is your niche the small movie?

RP:

You know what, I've never really—I'd like to be a moving target. So when I couldn't get a big movie made, I went and did television or cable, or—I wasn't, you know—then it was documentaries. I went to doing documentaries when, you know, that looked like fun, and documentaries are going through a kind of golden age right now. And you just can't look back and regret because, you know, as you say you're making choices on your feet every minute and some of those choices pay off and some of them don't.

DS:

Okay. Well, I know that one of those is probably waiting on you to take you to the next—

RP:

No, its been a pleasure. Good questions.

DS:

And I was going to say, is there anything you'd like to say and wrap it up?

RP:

Well, it's a pity that we can't talk after this afternoon, tonight just because I might have—be a little more informed about what I learned coming back, because literally, I just took the last hour

to drive around trying to find my way to where we were twenty-five years ago, and I barely could find it.

DS:

Well, if you don't mind doing a phone interview someday we could do that [RP laughs]. You know, because that's one way we do it now, so.

RP:

Okay. All right well it's a pleasure.

DS:

And if you don't mind lend a handy—

RP:

And your name is David Sanchez?

DS:

Daniel Sanchez.

RP:

Daniel Sanchez.

DS:

And let me give you one of my cards.

RP:

Sure

DS:

Now, the email is wrong, because apparently the printer doesn't know how to spell Daniel. And I can't see well enough to check it, but it's Daniel dot Sanchez at TTU dot edu.

RP:

So Daniel is the— so what it should read is D-a-n—

DS:

I-e-l. Yeah. Just don't spell it with a—

RP:

Yeah. Rather than A. Got it, okay good. Well that's great.

DS:

Yeah and I my—

RP:

And what's your story? When you said—

[End of Recording]



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