

RICHARD PEÑA, professor, School of the Arts, Columbia University

'Dedication and perseverance are key to becoming a successful film-maker'

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Richard Peña is a professor of Professional Practice in Film at the School of the Arts, Columbia University. He has also served as the programme director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and director of the New York Film Festival (NYFF) from 1988 to 2012.

A fan of Ritwik Ghatak, Bimal Roy and Guru Dutt, Peña, during a short visit to Mumbai, said that he hopes to see more Mani Ratnam movies in the US.

Here, he chats about films and studies related to it. Excerpts:

Could you tell us the difference between film studies and film-making. How should students go about pursuing either?

The difference is simple—film studies is studying films, their history, genres, why they were made and why they were treated or made the way they were.

Film-making, on the other hand, deals with the production side of it and actually sitting down to making them.

Students interested in making films should consider it at a graduation level.

I believe undergraduates should spend their time learning literature, arts, politics and science or maybe

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pursue film studies but even then, it is important to complement it with the subjects mentioned above.

After that, if they are still interested in making films, there are many graduation programmes.

Most students and schools go wrong in offering film-making at an undergraduate level.

Sadly, students tend not to have too much to make films about because they haven't really read or seen or lived that much.

What is the best way to learn and teach film-making?

There are many different curricula and a lot of different ways of approaching film-making.

However, I feel the best way to go about teaching it is to adopt a collaborative manner where students are encouraged to work on each other's films and perform different roles and duties.

A director in one film should be an editor in another and an actor in the third. It's the best way to learn. However, unfortunately, most other schools promote a lone wolf attitude where they emphasise that an individual does only his or her own work.

As with almost all the other arts, the best thing to do is to do and see as much as you can and try and take all that in. Also, never stop being a student.

How have you seen the lan-

guage of cinema change over the years? What should students be aware of while picking topics?

I happened to be at the NYFF at a time when a lot was happening, thanks to technology that changed the way movies were being shot leading to cinema becoming a visual treat.

By 2000, it was no longer unusual to receive a box with 20 films from Taiwan or 10 from Iran or Brazil because everything became so accessible.

Today, film-makers are choosing a range of themes—from making those on different ethnic communities and class groups to sexual minorities.

So, students should explore world cinema to try and incorporate the best of everything in their films. They should try and go beyond classroom boundaries.

Success in films is not easy and often takes many years. How can students keep themselves motivated?

Success doesn't always have to be awards. You don't have to choose award-worthy themes. The students I cherish the most are those who make films they want to make. It's also not easy, it takes years before you can taste success.

In the meantime, some teach other students, some turn to commercial work but that's how it works if you have to pay film bills. Dedication and perseverance are key to becoming a successful film-maker.

Is there a right answer to the question: what kinds of films should one make?

I always tell them to make the films they want to make and represent what they desire. After it's made, we can talk about how to market it, which festivals might be interested in it.

However, it's not going to be of interest to anybody if it's not of interest for you.

