

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH RAMIN BAHRANI AND ALEJANDRO POLANCO

The independent feature *Chop Shop*, a deeply affecting slice of urban neo-realism by Ramin Bahrani, the director of *Man Push Cart*, is set in the Iron Triangle in the shadows of Shea Stadium. The film follows a 12-year-old orphan who ekes out an existence with his sister. The director and the film's young lead actor Alejandro Polanco discussed their film following a preview screening at the Museum of the Moving Image.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a preview screening of *Chop Shop*, moderated by Assistant Curator Livia Bloom (January 26, 2008):

LIVIA BLOOM: My name is Livia Bloom, from the Museum of the Moving Image, and this is Alejandro Polanco and Ramin Bahrani.

(Applause) I'll start by asking you, Ramin, how you got involved in the project of *Chop Shop* (2007); how the story developed; and how you found the location (which is so amazing in the film, it's almost like another character)?

RAMIN BAHRANI: I was editing my first film, *Man Push Cart* (2005), and my cameraman had to get his car fixed. (Laughter) He called me and said, "I'm going to get my car fixed and you need to come, because you're going to like this place." And of course, I did. Right then I said, "We're going to make the next film here." And that was in the winter of 2004.

BLOOM: So did you already have a story at that point and you were looking for a place?

BAHRANI: No, not yet, but I knew that I wanted to do something there. So from that point, I started going there.

BLOOM: The story grew out of that place?

BAHRANI: Yes, it grew out of going to the location a lot. While I was editing, maybe once a week; but then once *Man Push Cart* ended, I started going there all the time. And as I said, I started to notice the young kids who worked and lived there, and it seemed like that would be the subject; it should

be one of these young boys. Then the story kept kind of developing from there.

BLOOM: And Alejandro, how did you hear about the project? And I know that the casting, his casting process is pretty involved. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

ALEJANDRO POLANCO: Well, he came to my school, and I was sitting down at a lunch table. He pulled me over to—Like, he was talking to the staff, and he asked one of the staff, "Oh, who speaks Spanish? Which kids speak Spanish?" So the staff pointed out to me. They called me over to the side, and he asked me, "Oh, do you speak Spanish?" And I was like, "Yeah." And then he said, "Oh, go ask that kid right there if he spoke Spanish."

So I went and I asked him, and he said no. I went back and I told Ramin. Then Ramin, he pointed—I don't know why, but he pointed to a ketchup on the floor, like a pack of ketchup, because I was about to step on it. He pointed to it, and I picked it up and I threw it in the garbage. Didn't pay no mind to him. After that, he just called me back for an audition, and that's how it all started. (Laughter)

BAHRANI: He's leaving out that when I first saw him, he wasn't sitting at a table, he was chilling with four ladies (Laughter) like, three years older than him, and seemed to be charming them quite successfully. I liked that he took... Well, I thought if he stepped on that ketchup it would be humiliating and it would make a scene. I liked that he took nonverbal direction so well (Laughter) and that he completely ignored me after that and went

right back to the continuation of his life, which tends to be how I make films, which is there's no—he knows—there's no calling of action or cut.

Half the time, it takes the rest of the crew a while to figure out that I and my cameraman have started. Usually, the sound guy, who—he had been involved in *Push Cart*—he's usually the third one to figure out that we've started doing something. Then little by little, the people come to understand and try not to get in the way. (Laughs)

POLANCO: Wait, *he* left out one part now! (Laughter) When we were shooting the movie, he made us do like, forty scenes. Not just one, two, three. It had to be perfect for Ramin. It wasn't just like, "Oh, let's do like, three scenes, see how it comes out. Then the fourth shot, that's it; that'll be the shot." It's like we spent all day on one scene; moved on, ate lunch, and then worked on another scene. So it was basically, like, two scenes a day, right?

BAHRANI: A lot of the stuff that may appear to be documentary is actually usually thirty or forty takes. Most of the scenes are done in one shot. I wanted them to be right, and when they got right, I would do ten more in case something magical happened.

BLOOM: So for instance, the pigeon scene at the end—which is so beautiful, that shot. Can you tell us about that one?

BAHRANI: Well, those pigeons belong to that guy Carlos [Zapata], down the street, who introduces them to Alejandro. And that's, like, one alleyway and eight or nine garages down. Those pigeons arrive at 8:00 in the morning, and wait on the posts and whatnot for that guy to show up at 8:30 a.m. They're there thirty minutes in advance. (Laughter) When he walks there, they're already coming to meet him, and if you rattle the lock, they'll come down.

So I started showing up at 8:00 in the morning (because he would get there at 8:30 a.m.), and I started to feed them and lead them down the road to Rob [Sowulski]'s garage. And that took three weeks. (Laughter) And then once I got them to come in front of Rob's garage, I started showing up like, five minutes earlier, because I

knew the sun would ruin the shot. So I figured the more time I have before the sun goes up, the better.

I managed to get them to come at 7:45 a.m., but they wouldn't come any earlier than that; they wanted to sleep, I guess. (Polanco laughs) I scheduled it, to the dismay of the producers, at the very end of the film, which, for whatever reasons, was challenging. I had scheduled it over two days, because I wanted it in one shot—that you would believe that through a force of will, he made these pigeons come. I think we did it fifty takes, and it happened in one shot four times.

BLOOM: I think the film is a really unusual portrait of work in America. Ale's character—despite the sometimes dubious legality of his tasks, he is incredibly hard-working and ambitious; [with an] almost Puritanical American work ethic. Ale, you're so good in this chop shop, it seems like you had done that before.

POLANCO: Well, I've really, like, never worked before. So like, this movie was just like a challenge to me. I really like cars, but I didn't know how to mess with them or nothing. So before we even shot the movie, we spent, like, six months there, and I worked on the cars and I learned how to sand, paint, and everything else. I respect Rob, because I could have messed up one of his cars and he would've had to fix it, and that would have been more money for him. So like...

BLOOM: So he paid you to work in his garage?

POLANCO: Yeah. It was like when everybody saw me pulling in the cars, like, before that, he used to give me five dollars for each car. So every car I brought in was business for him, so I got five dollars of that money that he got.

BAHRANI: He funded the preproduction, Rob. (Laughter) Because for six months, he worked there, and then... It was weird, on the second or first day of filming, we were doing some of the scenes where he's calling cars in. Some of those scenes are really documentary. I mean, those are cars that he's actually pulling in, and they are getting their cars fixed.

I remember after we would shoot it, he would keep calling them in, because he wanted to make that five dollars. (Laughter) And someone in the crew—[production sound mixer Christof] Gebert, I think—turned around and it was like, “Ramin, does Alejandro know that we’ve stopped filming?” I said, “Yes; he’s just trying to make extra money!”

But you had had jobs. You had sold those pastries and foods your aunt had made...

POLANCO: Oh, oh; my aunt, she used to cook and I used to go downstairs and sell them for her. But I don’t really count that as a job, because I used to sell it to my friends and they used to buy it.

BLOOM: So Rob is his real name, and that really is his garage. Can you talk about that style? Because each of your characters, their name is their actual name.

BAHRANI: Yes; unless someone’s real name doesn’t really work—but they all had really good names... like Isamar [Gonzales], that’s great. I couldn’t come up with that. So why change them? Again, it helps eliminate the wall between fiction and documentary, which I think is a line that doesn’t have to be so clean and I’m not sure there should be such a division. And I think that just helps that process.

Like the new [film] I shot, the guy’s real name wasn’t good. His name was Red... which could be really great, but it sucked up too much energy. So his name in the movie was William. I really never called him by his real name, even from the first time I met him. It took me a long time, now that the movie’s done, to remember what that guy’s name really was, you know?

BLOOM: The film actually, a lot of different critics have written about where it fits, in terms of neo-realism and other films that it references and other film movements. It seems to have roots with European filmmakers and films like *The 400 Blows* (1959) and *The Bicycle Thieves* (1948). But it also seems to have Middle Eastern influences, too. Can you talk about some of the films and filmmakers that influenced you?

BAHRANI: I’m influenced by a lot of films and filmmakers, even ones that our work [doesn’t] really resemble—I mean, I was watching [Federico] Fellini last night, and there’s just no—it’s from two different worlds. But probably more for my work, Robert Flaherty and [Robert] Bresson, definitely. And [Abbas] Kiarostami, of course; my background’s Iranian... Definitely the Italian neo-realists, sure—[Ermanno] Olmi; [Roberto] Rossellini—*Flowers of St. Francis* (1950) is one of my favorite films.

BLOOM: How about you, Ale? Are there films that you were thinking of when you were making this film?

POLANCO: I don’t really know, like, no independent films. Once Ramin told me that we was going to make a movie, I was like, “Wow, Hollywood!” (Laughter) Then he told me it’s a small movie, so like, I don’t really know—I just thought we were going to make it to the big films—but it’s a good movie, so I thank everybody out here for coming to see it.

BLOOM: One more question, and then I’m going to open it up to the audience. I wonder if you can talk about the cinematography? It’s such a stand out. The colors are so vibrant, the lighting is glowing; the compositions are so clean. And can you talk about the technique that you used to shoot it? When I first saw it, I was sure that it was shot on 35mm.

BAHRANI: Yes, Michael Simmonds is the cameraman, who shot *Man Push Cart* and also my new one. And he’s a New Yorker. We’ve known each other, I think, since 2002 or 2003. He shot a film for Amir Naderi—you know, the Iranian director. It was at Tribeca and I saw it, and I met him afterwards, and from then we became kind of colleagues and friends.

All my films have been shot on hi-def. It’s not shot on 35mm. But we’re very vigilant about what is allowed in the frame and what isn’t, and he’s quite skilled with the camera. Then we have a really lengthy color correction process, where the colors look great, but in fact, we’ve drained so much of the color out to avoid it kind of popping all over the place, the way video tends to do.

We avoid wide lenses. But not even for video reasons. I don't really like wide lenses. I think it's disrespectful to the people and the images in front of the camera. I think 50mm is a good one, and most of this film was shot on a 50mm lens. But yes, Michael Simmonds is incredibly talented, and we work very, very closely together.

BLOOM: You make a great team. All right, if anybody has questions, I'll take some from the audience. Yes, right here; I'll repeat the question, too.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm very curious about the scene when the kids are selling candy in the subway. Would you talk about that scene: how you got it? And did you have to get permission to shoot in the subway?

BLOOM: (Repeats audience question) Can you talk about shooting the G-train scene on the subway?

BAHRANI: Yes, we did. I don't really know how; somehow we did get permission—because it's really hard to get permission to shoot in a subway without a huge insurance claim; all kinds of things that I don't know much about. Somehow, we did. The Film Office has really been nice to me, and they got it for us somehow.

We did the scene with Ale and Carlos—actually, that scene, in addition to the whole film, we shot it on a Handycam in advance of making the film. So he and Carlos, and I and my cameraman would shoot them selling candy on the train to real people. We would film them like, this close [indicates small distance] doing it. So they would just forget all about us by the time we came to make the film. They kept the money from that time, and when we shot the film, they would—you know, they kept the money that time, and when we shot the real film, they kept the money too, so they were...

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Are these real people in the scene?

BAHRANI: Yes, they were real people. That's the great thing about New Yorkers is, they've seen so many cameras they don't really care. (Laughter) I'm amazed still. Like, that woman who—not even once does she look into the camera, or even

care! No one asked any questions, either, like, "Why is there a camera and five people following?" They just bought their candy and went... It's amazing, you know? Thank you, because that was like New Yorkers; they allow these things to happen.

BLOOM: Can you talk about that scene, Ale? What that was like for you?

POLANCO: Well, first, like, I was scared, because I've never sold candy on a train. I'm not shy, but when you're talking to people, and I'm like, "Oh, they're going to say something, because we have a camera." So I was like, "Oh, I'm scared."

So then, like, the first car, I was really... I was scared. But then, like, just people were buying candy without saying nothing, so I was making my money. (Laughter) So then, like, it didn't really bother me. But then when we went to the second car, I was more comfortable doing it.

The first time, before we were shooting the film on the Handycam, that was when we made thirty-five dollars. Like, we both split thirty-five dollars. I was like, "I want to do this again!" (Laughter) I made money.

BAHRANI: They were really excited for that scene. (Laughter) They kept, "When are we going to do...?"

BLOOM: Another question from the audience. Right here in the black shirt.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: The dialogue is so wonderfully natural; I'm curious to know what portion of the characters are real people as opposed—trained actors or not trained actors? And how much of the dialogue was ad-libbed or [stayed] with the words of the script?

BLOOM: (Repeats audience question) The dialogue is so natural; how much of it was improvised? And how many of the actors were professional versus non-professional?

BAHRANI: The only actor in the film really, is Ahmad [Razvi]—and he was never an actor until he was in my first film, *Man Push Cart*. Maybe there's one—the guy in the very end, the john. He

was an actor, because that's kind of a trickier part to find someone to do. (Laughter) But no; Ale, Carlos, Rob, all the main characters—they'd never studied acting or been in a film. They had never been in front of a camera until we started putting them in front of the camera for a long, long time.

The dialogue: I never showed them the script, but there was a script, a very detailed one. In the rehearsal process with him and Issie, for example, I would tell them what the scene was about, and kind of what they had to do, and then I would tell them the dialogue. "Okay, you say this, then you say that; then you say this, then you say that; you say this, you say—" They would remember enough of it to get the point, and then they would start doing scenes. We would rehearse, and I would film all of them. And little by little, their own words would replace some of the things that I had written.

Then the best of these things, I would transcribe and incorporate into the script, and then they would have to memorize those improvisations. It sounds really complicated, but that's... Like, in the script, it doesn't say—in the script it was like, "Your sneakers are fake," and then she would say, "No, they're real." Well, she said, "No, they official." That sounds really good, and I don't know how to say that, so then she had to say that every time, you know?

Or she said, "Guys like girls names better," when they're talking about the van. I thought that was great! And she had no idea what the film—She, until we saw the film for the first time, she didn't know what the rest of the film was about. She only knew her scenes. I remember when we watched it, she was like, "You stole that!" Remember?

POLANCO: Yeah! (Laughter)

BAHRANI: Because she didn't know! And at that point, when she came up with that line, I hadn't told her about the prostitution element of the story, so I thought that was a really interesting line. So those things started to stay. Or, "Name five cereals," the kids said that, and then I was like, "Okay, you have to do that every time." So then those became part of the rehearsals.

BLOOM: What was that like for you, Ale, not knowing what was coming?

POLANCO: I don't know... It's like, when he wrote the script, I was like, "All right, I'm ready to memorize." And then he was like, during the auditions, he told me that, "I don't say action, I don't say cut, I don't say nothing like that. You never see the script. I'll tell you what to say." Sometimes words just came out of nowhere—like they just came out, out of our mouths. And he, instead of his words, he put in our words to make it seem like we were really talking. He wanted to make it more like basically us talking, not him.

BLOOM: Another question... here, in the hat.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Have they shown this movie in your school in front of your classmates?

BLOOM: (Repeats audience question) Have they shown this movie in your school in front of your classmates?

POLANCO: They never showed... Well, the principal, he said that he was going to take the school, grade by grade, to see the movie. But we never showed it in a class or something like that. We never saw it in a class. Nope. We never saw it.

BAHRANI: It's opening in New York on February 27, at the Film Forum. I've heard it's a great place to take ten of your friends... (Laughter) And if you have kids in school, I've been told you should encourage the principal to take all the kids to see it.

Actually, I'm really curious, and we're trying, with the distributor and with the Film Forum, we're trying to reach out to schools to encourage them to bring kids to see it. Actually, in Cannes, we were really lucky: At the premiere, Kiarostami and [Atom] Egoyan showed up and were incredibly congratulatory. Egoyan is the one who told me, "Whoever buys this film, tell them they should market it to kids." He says, "I have a kid, and I want my kids to see this film, so they can understand what they have and what they don't have." And I thought it was a really great idea; and so I've told them, and they're pursuing it. And I really want kids, especially kids that are in kind of more affluent schools and whatnot, to see the

film so they can understand what else is happening five blocks down the street, you know?

BLOOM: What was that like, in Cannes with Kiarostami? You mentioned...

BAHRANI: It was pretty amazing for us, because we went to sit down and he was sitting behind us—which is kind of like terrifying, because you assume he's watching all the mistakes. Then the film ended and it was dead silence. The film ends the way it ends, and we're a nervous wreck, because in Cannes, if they don't like your film, they will let you know very quickly. And then the credits came and they started clapping, and it turned into kind of an ovation. They turned a spotlight on, which we didn't know, and I didn't know what to do! So I picked up Alejandro to block the light (Laughs) and they clapped more! And yes, Kiarostami was—he hugged and kissed us, and it was very kind of important for us.

BLOOM: Another question from the audience... (Repeats audience question) Did you have to get a release from people when you filmed in the subway?

BAHRANI: You have to get releases. Yes. It was me, the cameraman, the sound guy, the assistant camera, and [second assistant director] Himkar [Tak], I think?

POLANCO: Yes.

BAHRANI: And [assistant director Nicholas] Elliott, and two people were trailing us behind. And whoever we ended up filming, they'd be like, "Would you please sign?" Some of them were like, "No," and some of them said, "Yes." Then the ones that said yes—there were options, at least, in editing. We filmed for hours, and we picked the ones that seemed to work.

BLOOM: Another question right here, in the red jacket... The question is: in Iranian films, the questioner has observed that many times you have children in very adult situations. Can you talk about that?

BAHRANI: Not to simplify the answer, because there could be many reasons, but one of them is because with children's stories, it's easier to avoid

certain censorship issues. Like Kiarostami, he made, I think one film that involved a married couple. Then he realized he never wanted to do it again because how do you film a man and a woman in their own house and accept that the woman has to wear the veil, because it's a movie? So he said, "Well, just better not to film it." Because he was one of the forerunners—him and Amir Naderi—were some of the forerunners of introducing kids into cinema. Another reason was he, at that time, was working for the Institute of Children and Education and whatnot, and so he got funding to do projects about kids, and so he made movies with kids.

BLOOM: About the relationship between children and adults in the film, can you talk about that a little bit?

BAHRANI: I mean, I think it's pretty complicated, because sometimes Ale's a younger brother; an older brother; sometimes he's an adult; sometimes he's acting like a child; sometimes he's acting like a jealous boyfriend; sometimes like a dad. He seems to have to shift so many different ways. He's negotiating deals with adults on, you know, fixing a car—and doing it pretty well. Then the next second, he's, you know, throwing grocery carts or he's enjoying the baseball [game]. He's in a tough situation, and he has to kind of be older than his age.

I like that he's very slippery, you know? He has to survive, so nothing can kind of make him go down. He always has to come back with a joke or a... We talked a lot about that: how to keep his character light and how to... what responses he could come back with that would keep him going forward. Even in the end, he comes to his sister with something to make her smile, you know?

BLOOM: What was that like for you? Did you think about it differently when you were acting with a kid or when you were acting with an adult?

POLANCO: I saw, like, all the same, really, because at some points, I was acting really childish, playing with her. Like, "Name five cereals," that's... And then all of a sudden I have a job and I'm trying to negotiate with people to come into this shop and we'll fix your car the best out of everybody else. So I'm a kid, but I'm negotiating

with adults. It was like, every time I changed, I felt like... When I was like an adult, I had to be more... had to talk more sophisticated to them, negotiate it with them more, and convince them. When I was playing or something like that, I was really acting really childish; hitting with her, playing with her; grabbing her leg in the beginning; and I was always trying to make her smile. But when it was time to be serious, I was serious.

BLOOM: Did you film in order?

BAHRANI: It's my dream to film in order, but—please, someone who's incredibly rich, let me do that next time. (Laughter) It's financially so hard to do that. I mean, I'm shooting in thirty days. Most modest budget independent films are shot in like, fourteen days. I don't know how to do that. I think it's not gentlemanly to shoot a movie in fourteen days. (Chuckles) Or you should be a genius, and I'm not.

BLOOM: You can't do thirty takes, that's for sure.

BAHRANI: You cannot do thirty takes. I don't know how to do that. I wish I had three months, and I definitely, I would shoot in order. I wish I could do that.

BLOOM: At the end, the prostitution scene, you said there was something about that you wanted to describe?

BAHRANI: Yes; he wanted to. Well, we did a bunch of takes of that, too. And they were quite good, but...

BLOOM: It's a really tricky scene.

BAHRANI: Yes; you know, it involves him walking that long distance and coming there. We had a few good takes, but there was something, just something missing. I didn't know what. He knew, no matter what happens, to keep going. We had talked about that so much—because sometimes I may change things and never tell people what the change is, and they have to just keep going forward. They know what their point is in that scene, so they have to keep going.

So I took Ale back to the truck and said, "Don't forget, no matter what, keep going." I went back. And we had a fake gun for some scene and we never used it. So I gave that guy in the car a gun, this gun, and I told him, "Take Isamar; hold her like this, with the gun to her head. And then Isamar, when Ale comes, you be really freaking out." It's kind of already a scary place. So they said, "Fine." And then they came and I think Ale got really startled, and he let that guy have it pretty bad. That was the take we used.

BLOOM: What was that like for you, huh?

POLANCO: When he told me, "Oh, go ahead, keep on going," I didn't really know why would he come over here and tell me? I thought he was just, "Oh, go ahead. Alright, we're going to shoot another take." But he came over to me while I was sitting by a truck, and he came over to me, he was like, "Whatever happens, just keep on going." I was like, "Alright."

I walked all the way; I walked to the car; I walked around. I thought it was just, like, the same scene... and then I seen the gun! So I just—I don't know, I just blanked out and I just opened the door so fast and I grabbed the guy. I didn't even know what I was grabbing him by, his shirt, his head, his hair! I didn't know what I was doing, but I grabbed him and I just pulled him. By accident, I made him bleed! At the end, I made him bleed by accident. And like, that was just an amazing shot.

BLOOM: I'm going to stay away from you from now on! (Laughter) A question right here, in the blue shirt. (Repeats audience question) How do you work with the editor?

BAHRANI: I edited it myself. I had an editor for *Man Push Cart* for one day. He said the film was not going to be any good, and that I had no respect for the audience, and he left. (Laughter) So I looked at the computer—someone had bought it as an investment into *Man Push Cart*. I didn't know how it worked, because I had never used a Mac. I was like—You know, do you know how a Mac works? You push a button on the keyboard to eject the DVD thing. I was trying to move it with my hand. I was like, "Oh, man, I didn't buy a DVD— (Laughs) It didn't come with it."

My brother sent me an online tutorial. I watched it and then I just started editing. And on that film, I had two people that really helped me, in terms of philosophy of editing. It was two filmmakers, Lodge Kerrigan and Amir Naderi. They taught me something very valuable about editing, which was whatever's not good, admit it to yourself—no matter how important it is to the film—and just throw it away. Then try to make a film. Even if it's the most critical scene in your opinion, just throw it away. Now, with whatever you have left, make your film.

Amir really helped me on frame-to-frame editing—exactly what frame and why. He showed me that on *Push Cart*, and it was that... What he told me there really helped me because this film is really frame specific—when the cut is, depending on what's in the frame, like a movement or a flash of a light or something. But the first one was the biggest lesson.

BLOOM: Looks like he figured it out, huh? I'll take one more question. In the middle, yes. (Repeats audience question) Alejandro, what other projects would you like to be in? And if not, what would you like to study?

POLANCO: Before I did the movie, I wanted to become a baseball player because I grew up playing baseball and, like, that was my sport. But the movie inspired me to become an actor. So I want to continue acting.

BLOOM: And your upcoming project?

BAHRANI: The new film I shot in my hometown of Winston-Salem, North Carolina. It's about a Senegalese taxi driver. Thirty years old. Very friendly; very humble kind of guy. Very compassionate guy. The very first scene of the film, he's in the middle of a conversation—the movie just begins in the middle of a conversation—with a seventy-year-old Caucasian man named William, who's offering Solo a thousand dollars to take him to a mountain called Blowing Rock (which is two hours outside of Winston-Salem) in two weeks, on October 20... and he does not want to come back. So the driver, whose name is Solo, decides he has that amount of time to become his friend, to change his mind.

BLOOM: We'll be looking for that. The film *Chop Shop* opens on February 27, at Film Forum, so you can let your friends know. (Applause) Thank you so much for coming. Thank you. (Applause)

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