

Interview with alumna and filmmaker Desiree Akhavan '07

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Let's start with the basics. What house did you live in while you were at Smith?

Let's see. I was in Wilder my first year, Northrop my second year. I went abroad for my third year and then the Friedman house.

Did you work on any plays while you were here?

I auditioned for a lot, and was rejected from all of them except for one called "The Mother of Us All" and it was like a spoken word performance of a Gertrude Stein opera about the life of Susan B. Anthony. In that play, I played Virgil Thomson, a very strange side role where I wore a fat suit. I didn't understand any of the words I was saying. And it was so boring! Like I can't think of anything less interesting to go see than that.

Wow.

Smith was not a good place for me. People ask me about my college experience and did I enjoy it and I don't know if I would have had a better time at any other school. I think college isn't for everyone and that age isn't for everyone...Like even the cool mecca that is Smith College wasn't home for me. All the bulls**t that had been with me in high school was there, but this time it was set up as feminist and queer. I was still completely alienated. I don't think that's a terrible thing, to feel alienated and invisible and s***ty when you're a teenager and in your early twenties, I actually view it as a positive.

Even if it wasn't exactly a positive experience, how do you think it affected you and the work that you're doing now?

I think being surrounded by women was a good thing for me in that I never walk into a professional experience where I feel less than. I think my voice and my work deserves just as much attention and I cannot say that for all my female counterparts.

You started off as a theatre major. When did you decide that you wanted to be a filmmaker, as opposed to maybe like a playwright?

My second year, I made friends with this girl who wanted to be a filmmaker. I wanted to be just like her so I copied everything she did. She was taking a film class at Mount Holyoke and I only took the class to hang out with her. I was such a follower. I took the class and I just fell in love.

Can you tell me about what you're working on now?

[I'm working on a] film called "Adam." "Adam" is a coming-of-age story about a boy who pretends to be transgender to woo the girl of his dreams. It's a case of mistaken identity. She thinks he's trans; he goes along with it. It's a terrible thing but also really funny.

So what was it like working on "Appropriate Behavior?"

It was fun! It was hard. I also felt like, the awareness of how precious it is to be a director on a set and that it might be the last opportunity. And that if it were, you know, why would I not relish every moment of it?

What would your advice be to current Smithies and students who are about to graduate?

I think there was a part of me that just felt like waiting for someone to believe enough in me to give me this, like, shortcut to success or opportunities and that's not how it works. You keep creating environments in which you can do the work you love. And whether or not it sustains you financially, you find a way to get by. Even if it's on your phone or your friend's phone, you can always find a way to make something. Even if nobody watches it, you still made something.

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