

00:00:00	Music	Transition	“Switchblade Comb” by Mobius VanChocStraw. A jaunty, jazzy tune reminiscent of the opening theme of a movie. Music continues at a lower volume as April introduces herself and her guest, and then it fades out.
00:00:09	April Wolfe	Host	<p>Welcome to <i>Switchblade Sisters</i>, where women get together to slice and dice our favorite action and genre films. I’m April Wolfe. Every week, I invite a new female filmmaker on. A writer, director, actor, or producer, and we talk—in depth—about one of their fave genre films. Perhaps one that’s influenced their own work in some small way. And this is our very first remote recording, since we’re all doing physical distancing now.</p> <p>I’m recording from my bedroom, so I’ll warn you right now, you may hear my cat, Chicken, screaming in the background. And yes, I said screaming. The audio is likely going to sound a little different from our studio’s audio usually odes, but everything else is exactly the same.</p> <p>And today, I’m very excited to have writer-director Tayarisha Poe coming in from—are you in Philly right now?</p>
00:00:54	Tayarisha Poe	Guest	Ugh, I wish. That would be amazing. No, I’m in Brooklyn.
00:00:58	April	Host	Brooklyn. Wow. Braving it in Brooklyn. Tayarisha, it’s so great to have you on the show today.
00:01:04	Tayarisha	Guest	Thank you for having me.
00:01:06	April	Host	<p>Um, for those of you who are less familiar with her work, please let me give you an introduction in a this-is-your-life form. Uh, so Tayarisha is a storyteller from West Philly who believes that all stories are multidimensional and multi-sensory and thus should be told that way. She studied film at Swarthmore College, wheres she directed a handful of shorts, and then after graduation, she started working at the media center at Swarthmore, and then started writing her own first feature in her free time. You know, ‘cause she had a ton of free time, I’m sure.</p> <p><i>[Tayarisha snickers in the background.]</i></p> <p>Her brother, who has his own dance company, Idiosyncracy, then hired her to direct and film dance performances, trailers, shows, all of that stuff, as well as some poetic nonfiction projects she and her brother dreamed up.</p> <p>She continued freelancing as a videographer and photographer. You may remember uh, Anna Rose Holmer’s celebrated indie, <i>The Fits</i>, for which Tayarisha served as the still photographer, if I remember correctly. ‘Cause I saw her name, and I was like, “Oh, that’s that director I’m supposed to watch out for!”</p> <p><i>[Tayarisha laughs.]</i></p> <p>In 2015, her work earned her a spot on the 25 new faces of</p>

independent film list from *Filmmaker* magazine, and in 2016 she received the Sundance Institute's night foundation fellowship. Now, that feature that she was working on, *Selah and The Spades*, that wrapped up in time for her to be awarded a spot in the 2017 Sundance Screenwriters Lab, and in the June Sundance Directors Lab. She was also a 2017 Pew Fellow, if you're keeping count. But *Selah and The Spades'* long road finally came to fruition when the film premiered at Sundance in 2019, and now it's premiering to all of you at home April 17th on Amazon Prime.

Tayarisha also directed two episodes of *Two Sentence Horror Stories*, and you can look forward to seeing her episode of *The Twilight Zone* in season two.

Tayarisha, the movie that you chose to talk about today is *Brick*, and can you give us a little explanation on why this one is one of your fave genre films?

00:02:57 Tayarisha Guest

Uh, so it's really easy for me, because *Brick* is the first movie that I can remember watching that I really wanted to figure out how to copy. [Laughs.]

And so, that, for me, is like, "Okay, if I wanted to desperately to just imitate exactly what this was doing, then this must be an important film in my life." I've seen it a lot of times. I remember the first—the first short film I ever made was in high school, and it was basically like uh—I mean, in some places a word for word copy of scenes of *Brick*.

[Both laugh.]

It was just—and like, it starred like, my best friend, whose name was also Brendan, and another friend whose name was also Emily, so—

[April responds emphatically.]

—it was very much like, let me just work with what I know works. Um, but yeah, it was um—that movie continues to blow my mind to this day, because it's this daytime noir film, and like, I love anything that has teenagers but they speak as though they're the adults in the room at all times.

00:03:57 April Host

Mm-hm. Well, this has everything in it. It's got everything.

00:03:58 Tayarisha Guest

Yes! It does!

00:04:00 April Host

For those of you who haven't seen *Brick*, today's episode will give you some spoilers, but that shouldn't stop you from listening before you watch. As always, my motto is that it's not what happens, but how it happens that makes a movie worth watching.

00:04:10 Tayarisha Guest

Hell yeah.

00:04:11 April Host

Still, if you would like to pause and watch *Brick* first, this is your shot.

00:04:14	Music	Music	“Emily’s Theme” off the album <i>Brick</i> by Nathan Johnson
00:04:16	April	Host	And now, let me introduce <i>Brick</i> with a quick synopsis.  Written and directed by Rian Johnson for release in 2005, <i>Brick</i> stars Joseph Gordon-Levitt as high school student, Brendan Frye. I never remember his last name. Brendan gets a note in his locker sending him to a pay phone, where he gets a call from his ex, Emily, who’s in trouble and needs Brendan to forget about her.
00:04:37	Clip	Clip	<b>Emily:</b> I really screwed up.  <b>Brendan:</b> Screwed up how?  <b>Emily:</b> I did what she said with the Brick. I didn’t know it was bad, but the Pin’s on it now for poor Frisco and they’re playing it all on me.  <b>Brendan:</b> Slow down. Now, what?
00:04:50	April	Host	Brendan pushes for an invite to a party thrown by socialite, Laura, hoping she knows where Emily is, but Laura says she’s in the dark, too.
00:04:57	Clip	Clip	<b>Brendan:</b> If you haven’t got a finger in Em’s troubles, then why did her name get me into your rather exclusive party?  <b>Laura:</b> Keep up with me, now. I don’t know, but it sounded like you did, and a body’s got a right to be curious.
00:05:11	April	Host	Brendan doesn’t know if he can trust her, but Laura directs him to Dode, and Dode is able to arrange a phone meeting with Emily. Unfortunately, a note Brendan finds leads him to Emily’s dead body in a drainage tunnel. Brendan hides her body, and begins to investigate her murder, using three clues Emily said: Brick, Tug, and Pin.
00:05:31	Clip	Clip	<b>Brendan:</b> Emily said four words I didn’t know. Tell me if they catch. Brick.  <b>The Brain:</b> No.  <b>Brendan:</b> Or bad brick.  <b>The Brain:</b> No.  <b>Brendan:</b> Tug?  <b>The Brain:</b> Tug. Tug might be a drink, like milk and vodka or something.  <b>Brendan:</b> Poor Frisco.  <b>The Brain:</b> Frisco. Frisco Farrl was a sophomore last year, real trash. Maybe hit a class a week. Didn’t know him then, haven’t seen him around.

**Brendan:** Pin?

**The Brain:** Pin. The Pin?

**Brendan:** The Pin, yeah.

**The Brain:** The Pin's kind of a local spook story. You know the Kingpin?

**Brendan:** Heard it.

**The Brain:** Same thing. Supposed to be old, like 26, lives in town.

00:06:07	April	Host	The Pin is a secretive dealer, and Brendan picks a fight with local asshole and user, Brad, to try to get the Pin's attention. But then some guy comes after Brendan with a knife. Brendan draws more attention by trying to break into the Pin's henchman's car, and he finds out the henchman's name is Tug. So, Tug takes Brendan to see the Pin. The Pin says he'll hire him or kill him.
00:06:28	Clip	Clip	<b>The Pin:</b> I'll have my boys check your tale, and seeing how it stretches, we'll either rub or hire you. You'll know which by the end of the day tomorrow.
00:06:38	April	Host	And, you know, what a great prospect.  <i>[Tayarisha laughs.]</i>  And Laura reveals herself to be part of the Pin's operation too, and says that Emily stole a brick of heroin before she disappeared.
00:06:48	Clip	Clip	<b>Laura:</b> Three months ago. And I liked her, but she wasn't us, and it didn't work. And when she left, she took some souvenirs with her. Dirty habits she wasn't strong enough to control and a connection to the Pin to keep them going.
00:07:00	April	Host	The plot thickens. Brendan gets hired by the Pin, but he's quickly embroiled in that operation's drama about a stolen but returned brick of heroin that became tainted, and Tug's possible betrayal. Dode reveals he saw Brendan move Emily's body, and thinks that Brendan actually killed her, because Emily was pregnant with Dode's baby, and maybe Brendan was jealous.
00:07:20	Clip	Clip	<b>Dode:</b> You couldn't stand it, your little Em. She was gonna keep it, it was mine, and you couldn't stand that!
00:07:26	April	Host	A confrontation goes down at the drainage tunnel, and Tug kills Dode, revealing that he believes the baby was <u>his</u> , actually. Brendan faints, and wakes up in Tug's bed. Apparently, they're at war with the Pin!

So, Brendan arranges a meeting between the two factions, but has his own plan in palace, too, because the tenth brick is revealed to be missing. And in this confrontation, Tug explodes, beating the Pin to death, while Brendan places Emily's body in Tug's trunk to get him for the murder.

The next day, Brendan meets Laura and tells her he knows it was her who set Emily up for the stolen brick—

00:08:01 Clip Clip **Brendan:** She trusts you, she wants in. It's duck soup.

**Laura:** No.

**Brendan:** You frame her for the bad brick, then you cut her loose. You turn on your heel and bite her in the throat. Last week on the payphone, Del Rio and Sarmentosa, she saw something she was scared of. Tug's car driving by, the Pin riding shotgun, but she wouldn't have seen the Pin. No, she was across the street, angel. She saw the driver side. She saw you.

00:08:24 April Host —and that Laura, in fact, took it and got Emily killed by advising her to tell Tug she was carrying his baby. Laura retaliates by telling Brendan that the baby was actually Brendan's, and Laura was going to take Emily for an abortion, because Emily didn't love the father. Brendan will never know the truth, but Laura's going down, because he put that tenth brick in Laura's locker and informed the authorities.

And, you know, it's a pretty complex story, I'll say.

*[Both laugh.]*

00:08:50 Tayarisha Guest It's so complex. So like, the first couple times I watched it, I don't know if I fully knew what the plot was. Like, I had—I kept like, picking up on details. But I like, to this day, I'll watch it and things will surprise me about the plot!

00:09:04 April Host Absolutely. I was rewatching it for this and I was just like, "Oh shit! That's what happened!"

*[Both laugh.]*

So, one of the things I wanted to get into is that this is a very low budget movie, *Brick*. And something that Rian Johnson had to deal with, you know, was getting rejected quite a bit. He said, "I wrote *Brick* back in 1997, and it took six years to get it off the ground. Part of this was because the script was so unusual, and I was a first time director. Never an easy combination for the money people. But it was just a matter of sticking to our guns, refusing to change the script to make it easier to swallow, and not giving up until it came together, and eventually it did. We figured out the smallest amount we could shoot it for on 35 millimeter, then begged and borrowed from friends and family. End of the day, *Brick* was financed entirely independently for just under \$500,000."

00:09:58 Tayarisha Guest *[Emphatically]* Oh my god.

00:09:59 April Host So I mean, that's—

*[Tayarisha makes an exasperated sound.]*

—we're talking about long journeys, and I know that your film has had a long journey, too. I mean, he wrote it in 1997 and he knew

what he was going to be writing in 1997, and then the movie doesn't release until 2005. Of course, it has a festival journey, too, as did yours. I'm just curious, you know, let's talk about that kind of realization that you need to know, you know, exactly how much you can make it for and the least amount where you have to cut it down. Like, what was that journey like for you?

00:10:35 Tayarisha Guest Yeah, so. *[Laughs]* We, um—I started working with this producer, Lauren McBride, who also went to Swarthmore, and that's how we met. Um, she's amazing, absolutely brilliant. We started working together in 2014. In 2014, I put out this like, this thing called *Selah and the Spades: An Overture*, which was a mix of the short stories, these vid—photo stories, and short films that I had made with these teenagers in Philly over the summer of 2014. Um, and so, called *Selah and the Spades: An Overture*, and once I put that out, Lauren reached out to me and was just like, "What are you doing next? I wanna help." And so—

00:11:15 April Host Oh, that's so great.

00:11:16 Tayarisha Guest Yeah, she's absolutely amazing. I think she's at San Francisco, um, something now. But, she's amazing, and she—we started—we basically—like, neither of us had ever made a movie before, or a feature film before. And so every day, or every month, it was basically having this conversation of, "How little money do we need to make this movie?" And I think when we started out, we were trying to make it for like, \$30,000. *[Laughing]* So, it was really not realistic for what we envisioned the film to be!

But, we never gave up raising that amount a little bit, so that we could still—like, we were always trying to figure out how little money we had to spend to get this thing made, because that was—like, it's just this assumption—I mean, an assumption but also just what tends to happen is, they're only willing to give you as little money as possible, so. *[Laughs.]*

If we went armed with that information then we felt like we could end up on top, and I think that we did. And what he says about, the script is a little bit different, like, what Rian Johnson said about *Brick*. I knew that threw as going to be—not hesitation, but a sense of not understanding... I knew going into pitching that there was going to be a lot of resistance about seeing Selah as the hero of her story, and not like, painting her as the villain.

So, in seeking funds and talking to investors and production companies and stuff, almost the first thing out of a lot of people's minds—because this is how, I think, what we're used to as audience members—um, a lot of—or, the first thing a lot of people would say is, "What if we, you know, tell this story entirely from Paloma's perspective, and just let Selah be this villain, and let her be like, this mean girl character."

And it's like, totally, yeah, I've loved those movies too, but the reason I'm writing this movie this way is because I'm so sick of just seeing this quote-unquote "villainous" person through the eyes of the hero. Um, so that was like—I feel like that—I feel like I could see

Rian Johnson running into similar questions about who's the hero of this story and who's the villain. Um, it's difficult for people to, you know, morality tales.

00:13:34 April Host

Oh yeah, the shades of morality.

*[Tayarisha affirms.]*

And especially like this, like the hard-boiled type of thing. It's not as um, uh, black and white as so many people would like to have it. In some ways I kind of feel like the story that you're telling is almost like if we told *Brick* through Laura's point of view as well.

00:13:52 Tayarisha Guest

Oh, one hundred fucking percent.

00:13:53 April Host

Which I think is, you know, I think it's really interesting, because she has her own reasons and she has—

00:13:59 Tayarisha Guest

She's the mastermind! She's controlling everybody behind the scenes. They don't even realize it, and I'm all like, every time I watch that movie I'm just like, "What is going on with this girl? I want to know right now!" Because that's the most interesting thing to me is who's the one who's controlling the plotlines? And she is.

00:14:15 April Host

Oh yeah. You know, I would say when it came to *Brick* and the casting of Joseph Gordon-Levitt, I think that was kind of a coup for them. He had already been on *Third Rock from the Sun* for so long.

00:14:26 Tayarisha Guest

Yeah. I had such a crush on him in that show, yeah. *[Laughs.]*

00:14:29 April Host

God. Yeah, so many people did! It was funny, there's a few interviews where he was talking about how, despite the fact that this movie seems so different from *Third Rock from the Sun*, he actually learned, um, pretty much everything he needed to know from working with John Lithgow on that show, because John Lithgow has, um—I mean, if you had watched it, you would know he has a mouthful of lines.

*[Tayarisha laughs.]*

You know, for every scene, he just like, has to say so many. Apparently they would have, you know, like twenty times more lines for him because he'd have to deliver them so quickly and so succinctly. Um, and so he was, you know, he kind of looked to John Lithgow for help for doing this role and how to say things very quickly.

00:15:14 Tayarisha Guest

Oh, that's sick! That's so cool.

00:15:18 April Host

I think that's really lovely to think about, that there's a connection between those two. And so speaking about these mouthfuls, I want to talk about Rian Johnson's writing process for this.

He said, "First step I took was I wrote this as a novella in prose, copying Dashiell Hammett's writing style, which is very particular, very abrupt. And that, for me, helped to shape the story and the dialogue and to capture the feel of some of those books. Then I just transcribed that into screenplay form. The entire writing process

took about four months or so, but that was all a year after percolation.”

Um, so every writer has their own process, right? We go into this constantly. I think it’s an interesting thing, he writes it out as a novella, almost—because to me that seems like he’s doing a full outline as opposed to just kind of digging into the story itself. So, he’s really concerned very much with plot, and how that plot can work itself out. Because when it is intricate, it’s hard to just kind of go directly into the final draft, and then just try to write form there. So you know, like, lots of conspiracy theory strings have to be tied up.

00:16:25 Tayarisha Guest *[Through laughter]* Yeah, that makes sense.

00:16:29 April Host I—what—what was your process like?

00:16:33 Tayarisha Guest That’s so funny. I didn’t know that he’d written a novella originally for *Brick* until like, literally a week ago, because he posted it on—or he posted um, a link to—this sounds like I stalk Rian Johnson but I swear I don’t. I’m just online a lot.

*[Both laugh.]*

But he posted on Twitter—

00:16:52 April Host Tayarisha Poe, very online.

00:16:54 Tayarisha Guest *[Through laughter]* I know. He posted on Twitter, um, he posted the *Knives Out* script, and I remembered when I was in college, I used to obsessively reread Rian Johnson scripts. Because they were written, um—like, his scripts are very enjoyable to read. Um, and so I went to his website just to check out the *Knives Out* script, and then I realized he also at some point posted this novella um, that he made for *Brick*.

And it’s—it was such like a mo—or like, a week ago when I found this out, it was such a like ‘I’ve returned home’ moment because I do the exact same thing. And so like, I didn’t even—like I didn’t even know that he did that, but it makes total sense, because you have these—or because he’s a filmmaker who creates such rich and deep worlds within the span of that two hour film. And like, that—the whole reason I want to make movies, or I’ve always wanted to make movies, is because I want to just live in a fictional world at all times.

And so the way that I write is I always start out by writing it out as a short story, or um, you know, along whatever format the story needs to take, but I always have to start out writing in prose. And whenever I’m working on a new idea, I have to just like, write a bunch if vignettes. Just prose vignettes as though I’m writing a book, because it’s the only way that I can—it’s the only way in my life that I’ve figured out how to access the character’s inner world in order to make the outer world of the story as rich as it needs to be for me to believe in whatever the plot is.

So I guess like, it’s interesting to hear him talk about how he writes



things out, and following Dashiell Hammett's style, I like that a lot. Or how he writes things out to figure out the plot, I feel like I write stuff out in prose in order to figure out the—like, the emotional plot of things, and then, just like the plot itself, like, "Oh, and then somebody steals a ledger, whatever." *[Laughing]* That is almost not important to me. Like, I don't really care about those parts of storytelling, but like, the emotional worlds—

00:18:56	April	Host	Yeah, yeah, yeah. Tracking the emotion, yeah.
00:19:00	Tayarisha	Guest	Yeah, 'cause that'll tell you what the plot needs to be. If you need to know like, who—or once you figure out who has the power, like, that's gonna drive so many of those plot decisions that I'm trying to figure out.
00:19:10	April	Host	I like that. I would love to see like, a little diagram of just like, your script, or just like, "Okay, who has the power in this scene? Who has the power here? Who has the power—" Just kind of like a mathematical formula.
00:19:21	Music	Transition	"Switchblade Comb" by Mobius VanChocStraw.
00:19:22	April	Host	Um, we're gonna take a quick break. When we come back, we'll get, you know, further into some of the writing processes and some other things. But we'll be right back.  <i>[Music fades.]</i>
00:19:32	Promo	Promo	<b>Music:</b> Sophisticated electronic/string music.  <b>Travis McElroy:</b> Hello, Internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.  <b>Teresa McElroy:</b> And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy!  <b>Travis:</b> And together we present <i>Shmanners</i> .  <b>Teresa:</b> It's extraordinary etiquette—  <b>Travis:</b> —for ordinary occasions!  <b>Teresa:</b> We explain the historical significance of everyday etiquette topics, then answer your questions relating to modern life!  <b>Travis:</b> So join us weekly on <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> or wherever podcasts are found.  <b>Teresa:</b> No RSVP required!  <b>Travis:</b> Check out <i>Shmanners</i> !  <b>Teresa:</b> Manners shmanners... get it?  <i>[Music fades out.]</i>
00:20:06	Music	Transition	"Switchblade Comb" by Mobius VanChocStraw.

00:20:13 April

Host

Welcome back to *Switchblade Sisters*. I'm April Wolfe, and I'm joined today by Tayarisha Poe, and we're talking about *Brick*.

Okay. Um, let's talk about, um, I don't know. Let's do something that—if you don't have any connections to anyone in Hollywood, how do you get into Hollywood?

*[Tayarisha makes an incredulous sound and laughs.]*

This is something that Rian Johnson had to figure out. He has a great quote or two from this. He said, "I wrote this right out of film school, then I got it to anyone who would read it. I had no connection in the industry at all, and I'm very bad at putting myself out there and selling myself. That was part of it being such a long process. My friend Steve Yedlin, who shot the movie, he was working as a grip on film sets, so he would pass it to the producer whenever he could. That's how we found one of our producers, actually. It snowballs from there.

"Me, I got a series of day jobs. I worked at the Disney Channel for a few years, producing children's promos, and I worked at a preschool for deaf children in LA. I was basically their video guy, making instructional videos for the kids. They were jobs that kept me fed, but that didn't suck up all my time. It was tough not to second guess yourself the whole time, but it was important to stick to your guns." End quote.

So, I thought you might have something to say about that.

00:21:21 Tayarisha

Guest

I love that so much.

*[Both laugh.]*

Oh my god. I just... ugh. It's so—it's so interesting to be where I am right now, and I'm really grateful to be where I am, and I feel really fortunate. Looking back, when people ask me these sorts of questions, like how do you get here, I try not to be flippant when I say it but, I genuinely believe this to be true: a lot of it is luck. A lot of it is literally just being in the right place at the right time, and like, I hate sometimes that that's what it boils down to. But because it's like, it's so ephemeral, it's—like, you can't really bottle luck up, unless you're in, you know, fucking *Harry Potter*.

But it's so—*[Sighs]* When I tried to figure out how to deal with the fact that most of life and success in life boils down to being in the right place at the right time, I always go back to what my mom used to tell us when we were kids, which is that like, it literally doesn't matter what you do or what level you get to or how much talent you have, because if you're not ready for whatever comes to you, then you're screwed.

*[She laughs. April affirms.]*

That's like, that's it. It's just literally—so I have to like—part of what I tell myself is like, yes, it's luck, and yes, it's just good fortune and those things, but it's also that every time I've managed to make a

connection or met somebody, or they've asked me, "So, what are you working on?" I've always had something. And like, I've almost always had something that's finished. Like, I really like to complete things and like, complete projects.

So, for a couple of years, whenever people asked about *Selah and the Spades*, the feature film, it was like, "Yeah, here's this website where I basically outline the entire world for you in this visual appealing way that is its own complete project." Uh, and that had a huge effect. That made a huge difference for me.

00:23:11 April Host I was just gonna say, I mean like, you're—you have to be planning. I mean like, the benefit of having a little bit more time to work on, you know, a first feature—you know, trying to look at the sunny side, is that you are absolutely ready by the time that people fucking give you the money.

00:23:28 Tayarisha Guest Oh, you're so ready! You're like, nobody in the whole entire universe knows this movie as well as you do, and you will be able to just, like, charm people off of that. Like you're going to—or at least, that's basically what our strategy was. Was, "put me in front of a group of people and let me convince them that this fictional world is the coolest club on the block. And like, they want to get into this club."

And I was able to do that, because it's just, like, I've literally only—I've literally been living this story for years. Like, this is all that I do with my time, is think about this world, or these fictional worlds, and these fictional people. Ask me a question, and I'll have an answer. And if I don't, we're gonna figure it out together. So, I do think that that—I'm grateful for all that time, because I feel like it... Yeah, it's just in service of this worldbuilding that I think everybody should be doing when they write. Or at least, I hope that everybody's doing.

00:24:24 April Host I'm really curious. Because another aspect of being really ready for this in terms of not just pitching but also shooting is something that Rian Johnson had something to say about. He said, "We had 20 days to shoot the movie. I dug out storyboards I drew six years ago that I can line up against the movie now, and they're the same, exactly."

*[Tayarisha responds emphatically with "wow".]*

"The fact that I had that element really solid in my head for so long meant I could focus on the more immediate tasks at hand on set. Like, working with the actors on dialogue, as opposed to thinking about camera placement, and how the scene would cut together."

End quote. And, in terms of that kind of, like, you know. "You don't have to get ready if you stay ready" kind of attitude, uh, I thought that that was really interesting, that he had visual aspects so solid in his head, that he really apparently like, yeah, his storyboards look exactly like the movie, he was able to just hand those over to his cinematographer, Steve Yedlin, and you know, let him kind of take over of how to accomplish those things. And um, you know, like, that—when I look at the movie, and I'm like, "Yeah, wow, five

hundred thousand dollars.” But I look at those shots, and like, “Oh, shit! That’s why.”

*[Tayarisha laughs.]*

Like he, was thinking of those early on. And that’s something, also, that, you know. He talks a lot about how he thought the Cohen brothers would sue him for making this movie. But he also learned from the Cohen brothers of how to write and storyboard things, so that they cut together, so you can make a very low budget film.

And um—so, what is your way of working, though? Because I think that there is no one right way, I mean, there are people like Rian Jonhson who will storyboard the shit out of things, and there are people who are like, “I need to be there in the moment, and we need to see what emotion is fitting it.” So, you know, like, what’s your thoughts on that?

00:26:14 Tayarisha Host

So here’s, like—writing a movie, and you know this, writing a movie is just you writing a movie! It’s just you sitting down, maybe with somebody else, and you’re just writing. There are words on the page, there are people that don’t exist in your head, typically. And you’re just writing down what they’re gonna say and do! Before you even cast it, before you even know who these people are, what they sound like, and what they look like, and how they feel. You’re doing all of that before that happens.

And so, I really love and lean into and will shout from the rooftops, I’m the sort of person and filmmaker who... I buy into that whole philosophy of like, you write the script, and that’s one version of the movie, and you actually make it, and that’s another version, and you get into the edit, that’s a whole other version of the movie!

Um, that’s what I do, and that’s what I love about filmmaking, because then it’s like, I feel like when I do that, and when I give myself room to be that sort of director and writer, um, everything about the process becomes so much more fun. Um, because it very quickly then goes from me telling other people what to do, or—it’s never me telling other people what to do, and it’s more, how can we collaborate together to build this vision in the moment, based on these elements that we have in front of us right now?

So, it feels a little bit more, like, seat-of-the-pants stuff, that I always like? And that’s kind of how I like to live my life, not knowing what’s coming next.

00:27:39 April Host

My god, woman.

*[Both laugh.]*

00:27:43 Tayarisha Guest

Like, this moment in time is very weird for me, but also very much what I’m used to.

00:27:48 April Host

Can I say though, Rian Johnson I think has the exact opposite attitude, because he said—this is about his rough cut, he dreads a rough cut.

He said, “I showed the rough cut to a couple of friends, and it was such a terrible experience, so soul crushing. I ended up having flu symptoms, just in bed with a fever afterwards. For a year I was editing this on my Mac, on my home computer, to be screening at festivals. My head is still spinning. But the rough cut is terrible.”

So, I’m—

*[They laugh.]*

You guys are like, complete opposite, yeah.

00:28:18 Tayarisha Guest

Well, for me, I’m just like, I’m—I honestly feel like part of this—or part of how I have a zen attitude now towards the process is because of Sundance. Or because I was able to go through the labs before making this movie. Because they’re just like, oh my god, at the directing labs you can make so beautiful, and so perfect, and just exactly what you intended. And they will rip it apart.

*[They laugh.]*

They will absolutely—you will sit in a circle with your advisors for the week, and they will destroy you. In the most, like, loving way, but they will absolutely destroy what you did. They won’t destroy you, I shouldn’t say that. They will rip apart the thing that you created. I think we can all—everybody listening to this, you, me, all of us, we can all say, without feeling any type of way about it, that directors tend to be the most egotistical of the bunch, in terms of filmmaking. And that’s totally fine!

*[April affirms.]*

We all know it to be true. So, I’m down for Sundance teaching us like that, in that way, because they’re all about helping us separate our ego from the artwork that we’re producing. And so, I like—I kind of love a rough cut screening, because I’m just like, yeah rip it apart, whatever! Like, it’s not me. It’s not Tayarisha, the person. I know I’m great, I think I’m awesome. Nothing that anybody says is going to change my opinion about myself, and if everybody’s there for the right reason, and if everybody is there with the right intentions, then we’re all there in service of the story. So, everything that everybody is saying is just trying to make it the best version of itself possible. So, I think that’s why I like that, like, feeling of uncertainty at all moments? In filmmaking.

00:30:00 April Host

Yeah. Man, you should teach a class on that.

00:30:04 Tayarisha Guest

Oh, man, I don’t know. First, I’m just trying to teach myself every day. Separate the ego from the artwork.

00:30:12 April Host

I mean, we’re all mild sociopaths.

00:30:14 Tayarisha Guest

Oh, that’s for sure, yeah.

00:30:17 April Host

Um, I thought I’d get a little bit into, um—y’know, back up just a little bit, and I feel like we should talk about the language, here, in *Brick*.

Um, Rian Johnson said, “The slang in the dialogue is taken from at on of different sources. There’s stuff from the 50’s, 80’s, stuff I made up. The purpose of the weird language, I thought, was important to establish style-wise that this wasn’t supposed to be highschool today. And language was a quick way of rapidly establishing we’re in a different world, here.” End quote.

To me it works, I mean, very clearly. But I think that’s kind of a rule that you get for any type of writing, is that you should drop people in so they assume that it’s natural. That this is expected, so you’re not spending your time spinning your wheels trying to explain things. Um, and uh, you know, I’m obviously noticing a lot of that in your film, too. I know it’s a boarding school, but I know that it’s not a typical boarding school. I know that it’s not reality. But it is reality.

00:31:19 Tayarisha Host I personally write stories so that—there’s stuff that you shouldn’t do, in life? There’s stuff that your moral compass will keep you from doing, and that’s great. But I write fiction so that all those things that I personally maybe would not do, I get to watch somebody else make those decisions. And so, in terms of like the language of the film, the language of their dialogue, and the slang that we use. Just like, even the cadence of speech, and just the speed in which they speak with each other? That was really important to me. Because I wanted to craft a fictional world that you knew was familiar, and that felt familiar. But that felt different enough from what is actual, and what is real, that you would want to escape to that fictional world.

So that’s really what it was for me. But it was also, like. There is something—I don’t know what the best example is, but like, say you go to like, a summer—this is so weird. You go to a summer camp, and everybody who went to that summer camp last summer knows to call juice “jammy”. But like, you don’t know yet that juice is called “jammy”, and you’re like, “What the hell is jammy? How do I learn—”

Like, that’s how you go along. You know what things are called. So, I wanted people who watch Sela to feel at the end, like, “Oh, the worst thing that you could possibly be is a rat. And you have to keep track of your ledger.” I just want like, this random vocabulary that people who watch the movie can have, that makes them feel like they belong to this fictional world.

00:32:52 April Host Yeah, and you introduce it pretty quickly, I would say, because you have all these characters together, as opposed to singularly. So it’s just having them speak to one another, and introducing those things, I think, is pretty effective. Yeah.

*[Tayarisha affirms.]*

We’re gonna take another quick break, when we come back, we’ll get further into that language, crafting it, and also locations, and a bunch of other stuff. But we’ll be right back.

00:33:13 Music Transition “Switchblade Comb” by Mobius VanChocStraw.

00:33:18 Promo Promo *[Radio interference followed by laidback music with a snare drum beat. A phone rings as the DJ speaks.]*

**Radio DJ:** Welcome back to *Fireside Chat* on KMAX. With me in-studio to take your calls is the dopest duo on the West Coast, Oliver Wang and Morgan Rhodes.

[Click.]

Go ahead, caller.

**Caller:** Hey. Uh, I'm looking for a music podcast that's insightful and thoughtful, but like, also helps me discover artists and albums that I've never heard of.

**Morgan Rhodes:** Yeah, man. Sounds like you need to listen to *Heat Rocks*. Every week, myself—and I'm Morgan Rhodes—and my co-host here, Oliver Wang, talk to influential guests about a canonical album that has changed their lives.

**Oliver Wang:** Guests like Moby, Open Mike Eagle, talk about albums by Prince, Joni Mitchell, and so much more.

**Caller:** Yooo! What's that show called again?

**Morgan:** *Heat Rocks*. Deep dives into hot records.

**Oliver:** Every Thursday on Maximum Fun.

[Music suddenly gives way to static and a dial tone.]

00:34:04 Music Transition

"Switchblade Comb" by Mobius VanChocStraw.

00:34:11 April Host

Welcome back to *Switchblade Sisters*, I'm April Wolfe, and I'm joined today by Tayarisha Poe, and we are talking about *Brick*. Um, so, you know, we've talked a little bit about the language. I wanna get into, like, as an actor, the process of coming up with that language, and how to deliver those lines. Um, because, Joseph Gordon-Levitt said, quote:

"*Brick*, I never really tried to come up with any region when I did this. But man, I just read the words a lot. Over and over again, until it started falling into something. And I listened to a lot more musicians than actors, Tom Waits being the primary one, Serge Gainsbourg. But, a lot of people, different poets, Wu-Tang Clan, even. I think had a lot of similarities with *Brick*. And just doing it until we thought it sounded good, there was lot of repetition, a lot of practice."

Um, I thought that was a really interesting way of coming up with the language, and being aware of it being different, but realizing that you have to digest it to try to allow it to feel real. Um. And, you know, I was curious about how you approach that, but I think that one of the things that Joseph Gordon-Levitt said,

"Even though the dialogue, and a lot of the camerawork and costumes and everything are kind of over the top, beyond reality, the emotions never are. The emotions are all very genuine. And the

whole point of doing as much practice as I did to get the words down, was so that when we actually do the scenes, when it actually came time to do them, I didn't have to think about doing the words at all. I could just feel what I needed to be feeling, and Brenden is not feeling good." End quote.

I thought that, you know, that sums it up for me. And, I'm curious, because you are "fly by the seat of your pants", and um, for me, this seems like, you know, he is doing this kind of, like, over-prepare, so that your body kind of takes on an autopilot. But then, there are some benefits for not preparing, because then you can feel a little bit more like, you know, loose, or something like that. And I was curious how you were approaching that.

00:36:15 Tayarisha Guest

That's such a good question. It's like, I feel like I simultaneously, as the writer and—or rather as director, directing these actors, we over-prepared and under-prepared. So, I would like—so like, we over-prepared in that they all had homework to do before they got to set. And like, everybody—the main characters had—I had these character biographies for them, and they all had like, short stories and poems that I wanted them to read, and we would talk about stuff, and we would all make playlists for the characters, and listen to those together. So, stuff like that, where there was a lot of preparation to get us into the mindset of people?

But, when it comes to the dialogue, because I knew we had a lot of first time actors, and a lot of teenage actors. And, it's also the difference between—one of the biggest differences that I didn't think about until now, between Rian Johnson making *Brick* back then, and me making *Selah and the Spades* now, is that Johnson didn't have *Brick* to influence him in making *Brick*. Whereas I had *Brick* to influence me. And like, I had, you know, all of Wes Anderson in terms of movies that have their own worlds, and their own language within that world, and their own design within that world.

Like, I had all these references, and everybody else on set had a lot of similar references, and we would talk about them a lot. But the thing that that does is, when you have a script like *Selah*, where the language at times is quite whimsical? Um I think an actor's natural inclination is to match their emotional—or like, match the whimsy of the words.

So I was constantly reminding people on set, and anytime a new actor came, I would say the same thing to him. The words are whimsical, so we don't have to be. Like, the words and their whimsy are enough, don't worry about that, just worry about the emotion of what you're going through. So, I think that it's related to—I think it really does relate to what, um he's saying about playing Brendan. Um, and that's kind of fascinating to me.

It's just like, the words are whimsy, you don't have to be whimsical. And I think that's how whimsy works. Or how whimsy is effective.

00:38:30 April Host

Yeah. Like, you have to play it for a reality, almost serious. Like it's the type of it.



00:38:35 Tayarisha Guest Exactly! Yeah, because like—exactly, because whatever’s happening to you, no matter what it says on the page, whatever’s happening to that character is very serious for that character. This is their life we’re talking about.

*[April affirms.]*

So, it made for some really fascinating moments, because they look and act like kids. But they speak with such gravity. Um, I think it’s really effective.

00:38:59 April Host Well, um, to get into the last thing I wanted to bring up about *Brick* was something that—you guys both premiered your films at Sundance, and I think that that’s something very interesting. But he sold to Focus Features right out of Sundance. And he said, quote:

“When we sold it to Focus at Sundance, we were able to get final cut in the contracts. So I actually did some recutting after Sundance, because after watching it with an audience, there are things I was wanting to speed up or tweak. Focus had suggestions, but we were in the nice place to not have to listen, because of that part of the contract.”

And I thought that was really interesting!

00:39:35 Tayarisha Guest Yeah. Um, that makes me really happy, to know that he had final cut, because I love when people have final cut. Everybody should get final cut! I have final cut, by the way, just so everybody knows. Shout-out to my producers.

*[Both laugh.]*

So all the problems with the film are on me. For sure. I can not blame anybody for anything. Feels great.

00:40:03 April Host God, you love punishment. You really love self punishment. You’re just asking for it.

00:40:09 Tayarisha Guest Oh, god. I make it work, I make it work.

*[They laugh.]*

00:40:13 April Host But I think, you know, that’s something that I appreciate, is just, you know, first time film makers who have someone who’s protecting them in terms of a producer, or anyone else, an executive who’s saying, “We believe in this person’s vision, we want them to get final cut.”

And I also like that Rian Johnson’s watching this with an audience, and it happens quite a bit. Something premieres at a film festival, and then it goes to theaters, to streaming, and you realize like, “Wait a minute, I don’t remember this scene playing out like this.” And it’s because the filmmaker saw it, realized that there were some issues, and made a different cut. And I think we forget that, a lot of people will repurpose reviews from film festivals that the movie was actually changed.

00:40:57 Tayarisha Guest Yeah. I—*[Laughs]* Oh god, watching it at Sundance was so hard, not because it was bad, I thought it was really great. Just because the experience of like, watching my first feature film with an audience. I don't remember anything about the movie itself, I just remember sweating through all of my clothes. I just—oh my God. I remember, like. I just remember sitting there gripping the armrest, and thinking to myself, "I can't even get up to leave, because I'm sitting next to everyone, and they're gonna see me go." So, yeah.

I—but at the same time, my editor was there too, Kate, and afterwards we both looked at each other, we were like, "Do you have notes? I have notes." That was uh, fascinating. And then we went back to the edit after we um—after Sundance, we came back to—er, after Sundance, and after Amazon bought the film, we went back into the edit, just in case we wanted to make any changes.

And we looked at our notes that we thought were so huge at the premiere. And we actually did the work, and found that we wanted to cut exactly five frames from the film. So, once we realized our issues with the film were pretty much just, like, "Oh, let's get out a hair earlier, let's leave a hair later." Then we were like, "Let's just leave it as is, and just fuck it, like, let's just let it out." His five frames for us was like—that's like a rounding error for me, that's just like, I've grown as a human being, and can recognize these differences. That's not the story doesn't require these five frames, that's—Tayarisha doesn't require them.

So, I think that the thing that I'm happiest about with the film coming out now, is that, there's finally no going back. It's just, like, it's out. And that's it. Um, because, if I—for instance, if we sat down today and re-cut the film, we would definitely come up with something entirely different. That, I know for sure. Because it's like, I'm a different person, Kate is a different person, the world is a different being, like. You couldn't make the same film today. And that's why I'm glad we didn't make those changes.

00:43:09 April Host Well. I think that is a lovely way for us to end our uh, talk today. I wanna thank you so much for coming on the show, Tayarisha.

00:43:19 Tayarisha Guest Thank you, I had so much fun!

00:43:21 April Host And, Tayarisha, can you remind us of when people can watch your movie, *Selah and the Spades*?

00:43:25 Tayarisha Guest Yes, April 17th on Amazon Prime.

00:43:28 April Host Awesome. And uh, thank all of you for listening to *Switchblade Sisters*, uh, we're gonna start doing something a little different at the end of each episode from now on. I'm going to be giving you a staff pick of sorts. A recommendation of a film directed by a woman. I know people all of a sudden have a lot of time on their hands, and that, you know, I just wanted to recommend some movies for you all to watch. And, this show is all about highlighting the great work of women filmmakers, after all, so, here we go.

This one is obviously a very recent one, but I think it's very worth a rewatch, just for this particular period of time where I think we've got

a lot of demons to exorcise. But I think that everyone should be watching Coralie Fargeat's *Revenge*.

00:44:12	Tayarisha	Guest	Love that movie. Sorry. It's so good!
00:44:14	April	Host	It was, you know, her first feature. It's so good. It's so good, you know? And it's taking this kind of male gaze of rape-revenge movie and turning it completely on its head in these really fascinating ways that you didn't think it was going to do, so, absolutely go and see it. And, it's giving—it's been given the Tayarisha seal of approval too, so you guys know that it's great.
00:44:34	Tayarisha	Guest	It's amazing!  <i>[They laugh.]</i>
00:44:37	April	Host	Okay so, if you want to let us know what you think of the show, you can tweet at us @SwitchbladePod or email us at <a href="mailto:SwitchbladeSisters@maximumfun.org">SwitchbladeSisters@maximumfun.org</a> .  Please check out our Facebook group, too. That's <a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/switchbladesisters">Facebook.com/groups/switchbladesisters</a> .  Our producer is Casey O'Brien. Our senior producer is Laura Swisher, and this is a production of <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> .  <i>[Music fades.]</i>
00:45:03	Clip	Clip	<b>The Brain:</b> Supposed to be old, like 26, lives in town.
00:45:05	Speaker 1	Promo	<a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> .
00:45:07	Speaker 2	Promo	Comedy and culture.
00:45:08	Speaker 3	Promo	Artist owned—
00:45:09	Speaker 4	Promo	—Audience supported.