

Guess What I Learned Today?

Today I learned about **Alexander Payne**.

When you grow up in Omaha, Nebraska, you get used to the idea that most famous people live somewhere else.

Actors live in Hollywood. Politicians live in Washington. Singers seem to live wherever recording studios are. Famous people occasionally come to Nebraska, usually because they are performing, campaigning, filming something, or driving through on their way to somewhere they consider more exciting.

Alexander Payne is different.

He is a filmmaker who was born and raised in Omaha, went away to learn how to make movies, became successful doing it, and then did something I find particularly interesting.

He kept coming back.

Alexander Payne is a director and screenwriter whose movies include Election, About Schmidt, Sideways, The Descendants, and Nebraska. His movies have received major recognition, including Academy Awards, and Payne himself has been nominated for directing. Nebraska alone received six Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture and Best Director.

That is impressive anywhere.

When the director came from Omaha, however, it becomes a little more interesting to someone sitting in Omaha writing an essay about him.

Payne grew up here and graduated from Creighton Preparatory School. He later attended Stanford University and eventually studied filmmaking at UCLA.

I like that part of his story because apparently you can start in Nebraska, go to California, and see what happens.

I am filing that information away for completely educational purposes.

What makes Payne especially interesting to me is not simply that he became successful. Lots of successful people leave their hometowns. What caught my attention is that Nebraska continued to matter in his work.

About Schmidt begins in Omaha. Election was filmed largely around Omaha. And then there is Nebraska, a movie that did not exactly try to disguise where it was taking place. They went ahead and put the name of the state right on the movie.

Subtlety has its limits.

The movie Nebraska follows an aging man named Woody Grant who believes he has won a million dollars after receiving a sweepstakes letter. He becomes determined to travel from Montana to Lincoln, Nebraska, to collect his supposed winnings. His son eventually goes along with him, and what sounds at first like a fairly simple road trip becomes a story about family, aging, memories, disappointments, and the strange ways people understand one another.

That is one of the things I am beginning to notice about Alexander Payne's movies.

The big thing happening is not always the important thing happening.

A road trip can really be about a father and son. An election for student-body president can become a story about ambition and human behavior. Ordinary people living ordinary lives can turn out to be complicated enough to fill an entire movie.

Maybe that is why Nebraska works so well as a setting for his stories.

Nebraska does not usually appear in movies as a place where superheroes are destroying downtown Omaha while aliens attack the Woodmen Tower. Most days, we manage to avoid both situations.

Instead, Payne seems interested in places that look familiar and people who feel real. His characters can be awkward, selfish, funny, disappointed, hopeful, ridiculous, or several of those things before lunch.

In other words, people.

I think there is something important about a filmmaker becoming successful without deciding that the place he came from was no longer interesting.

It would probably be easy to believe that once you reach Hollywood, the stories that matter have to become bigger. Bigger cities. Bigger adventures. Bigger explosions. Possibly a helicopter.

Payne's career suggests something different.

Sometimes the interesting story is sitting at the kitchen table.

Sometimes it is driving down a highway.

Sometimes it is happening in a school hallway, a small town, a family argument, or between two people who have known each other so long that they have stopped explaining themselves.

You just have to notice it.

That may be my favorite thing I learned about Alexander Payne.

Of course, winning awards matters. Having your movies nominated for Oscars matters. Building a career doing something creative that you love certainly matters.

But I think where you look for stories matters too.

Payne could have treated Nebraska as simply the place he came from.

Instead, he treated it as a place worth looking at.

There is a difference.

Growing up somewhere can make it difficult to see what is interesting about it because everything becomes normal. The streets are just the streets you drive on. The buildings are just the buildings you pass. The people at the grocery store are just people buying cereal.

Then somebody points a camera at those same places, and suddenly you look again.

Maybe interesting places are not always somewhere else.

Maybe interesting people are not always famous.

And maybe you do not have to travel across the world to find a story worth telling.

Although, for the record, I would still like to travel across the world.

I'm curious, not crazy.

What I learned from Alexander Payne is that where you come from does not have to be something you leave behind in order to move forward. Sometimes it becomes part of the way you see everything that comes next.

Alexander Payne left Omaha and became a filmmaker.

But Omaha apparently went with him.

I think that's pretty cool.