



Niv Fichman:  
Skipping Class  
to Make Movies

By Cynthia Amsden

Photos by Ted Amsden.

Location: Lanzarote, in Spain's Canary Islands.

Cast: José Saramago, Don McKellar and Niv Fichman.

Background: After being summoned to Lanzarote by Saramago to discuss the possibilities of getting the rights to turn to his book *Blindness* into a film, Fichman and McKellar have spent hours talking about everything except what they came there to discuss. The novel, which won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1998, is an allegorical tale about an epidemic of blindness that starts to spread in a nameless city. A concentration camp-like asylum is founded to isolate the blind, who see only white light. A doctor's wife follows her husband to the asylum, and around them gathers a small group of people who try to maintain some moral values among the internees, when violence starts to escalate.

"We didn't know exactly where Saramago was going with his questions, except he did say he felt cinema destroys the imagination, and I couldn't argue with that," recalls Fichman, "but apparently we said all the right things and we got on really well." After a few hours, the author said: "Okay, you can give this a shot." Slightly stunned by the abrupt concession, but unsure what Saramago meant, Fichman said: "What?"

Saramago: "Well, you know. You can try it out."

Fichman: "What?" Content to dance the dance of negotiation, content to exercise patience, hold back, to wait, Fichman knew that if his company, Rhombus Media, was going to get the go ahead, it would have to be in so many words; words the author was not saying. Silence.

Fichman (in his head): "Just say it!!!!"

Saramago: "I'm going to give you the rights to the book."

Breathing resumes and with this, Fichman and McKellar close the deal on the *Blindness* acquisition. Aside from the anecdotal entertainment, this is a cameo of how Niv Fichman works: never alone and preferably in harmony with counterbalancing talents. There is much evidence to show this is a signature trait. Rhombus Media is not Niv Fichman, but Niv Fichman is a primordial component of Rhombus Media, the Toronto production house responsible for some of the finest Canadian features in recent years—*Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *Last Night* and the Academy Award-winning (for its musical score) *The Red Violin*, the single most successful art-house feature ever produced in this country.

In an industry where ego is not only an issue, it is, in fact, often the industry itself, Niv Fichman is an anomaly. The dialogue at the beginning of our first interview involved a question of clarification from the subject of the profile. "Don't you want to do an article about Rhombus?" By his own admission, he is not devoid of ego; however, he does not appear to require a "sycophantocracy" in which to thrive.

Indeed, a Web search on Niv Fichman produces remarkably little. Search under Rhombus Media and there is ample content. Search under Rhombus' awards and one is inundated. This is a deliberate strategy, although the use of the word "strategy" might leave an aftertaste of calculation that is more corporate than Fichman would accept. "Rhombus is a collective. It's not that I would stop a journalist from writing about just me, or not want it to happen, but articles generally end up being about Rhombus."

Rhombus Media, as it exists today, is an ecosystem of 12: six partners; six staff. How it arrived at its present form might qualify as Darwinian evolution if there were the requisite bodies left on the side of the road, but the three who seeded the original idea—Barbara Willis Sweete, Larry Weinstein and Fichman—are still in full bloom. What is more curious is that there was no original mandate because the formation of Rhombus blessedly predated expressions like "vision statement." From a market-development standpoint, the success of Rhombus Media progressed without the impetus of an overriding marketing objective. "We have all kinds of MBAs coming around to study this company," says Fichman, "and I tell them I don't think this company is a very good example."

Over the years, the genesis of Rhombus has abbreviated itself in the telling, but its current brevity highlights the original goodwill more than the factual play-by-play. "We [Willis Sweete, Weinstein and himself] got together at school and hung out. In 1979, there were hardly any production companies and none of us were on the radar at that point. After several painful years, we realized we were good at demystifying the performing arts with cinema, using humour and music-video techniques. It didn't matter that they were about high art. They were just entertaining movies we made for our friends and ourselves."



Photo courtesy of Rhombus Media.

Fichman, tall, lean and visually without contrivance, talks with his hands. Fingers, to be more accurate. By watching them, the punctuation of his thoughts becomes apparent. Twenty-three years into his game and, when pressed, he can't deconstruct the psychodynamics of Rhombus. He does, however, recognize that the group has matured, in a business-definition sense, moving from being generalists to specialists. "Up to the point of *Making Overtures: The Story of a Community Orchestra* (made in 1984 and earning Willis Sweete an Oscar nomination for Best Documentary), we were all doing pretty much the same thing. We'd all produce or we'd direct. It was with that film when we first tried to break out for ourselves. In fact, I was the least involved in that particular project. That was Larry Weinstein's first film to direct, and Barbara was the producer. Since that time, Larry and Barbara have matured more as artists and they

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want to try different things. I've done mostly the production work and they've directed, and we have other partners who've come on board.

"I wouldn't recommend this for others, but it works well for us," Fichman explains with a self-deprecating smirk. "It's a fairly socialist spirit of equality and if you buy into it, as everyone here does, then you're immune to the regular fights about money. We've never dirtied ourselves in those fights." And this, he believes, is the downfall of other companies. Filthy lucre. His tongue is somewhere in the vicinity of his cheek when he points this out while noting, justifiably so, that Rhombus does have a notable track record. Would this be a passive-aggressive success model?

Fichman prefers to call this a marriage of six people, which is a loaded analogy considering therapists say the marital alliance is based on people settling for what they are prepared to live with, while Rhombus isn't about settling. If anything, it's about no compromise. And that is where the interview pivots away from the collective and toward the individual. No compromise is a righteous idea to which more than one production company has laid claim. Rhombus, or at least Fichman, feels he has gone the distance sufficiently so he can hold this up as a merit badge. He offers anecdotal evidence. When financing *The Red Violin*, the multi-language aspect of the script turned into a deal breaker—lose the languages and risk making a film about bad accents or keep the languages and beg for financing. The script did state that as the location of the film changed, so, too, would the language, but this was often overlooked. "We were in the office of one studio president who literally said, 'You mean this will be in Italian and German and Chinese?' We said, 'Yes, that's what they speak in Italy and Germany and China.' She looked at us, deadpan, and just said, 'Check!' It happened again when New Line picked up the film. They cancelled out at the very last minute for the same reason."

Fichman thinks a bit more and then coils out another example, the six-part Bach cello suites, *Yo-Yo Ma Inspired by Bach*, Rhombus produced for television in 1997. "In Yo-Yo's mind, all creativity comes from the same place. It's a codification of emotions and it manifests itself in music or dance or literature. Proof of this would be to take the Bach cello suites and create various worlds inspired by them. Yo-Yo wanted the first suite to inspire a garden. I was reluctant. It's one thing to commission a dance but quite another to build a garden. But you can't compromise and that's the project you have to go with. We had three or four years, so we started right away with a garden in Boston and got documentary filmmaker Kevin McMahon to film its creation." Three years later, complications arose in Boston and the whole thing collapsed.

Rhombus had half a film that was never going to be finished.

Grappling for an alternative, Fichman and Yo-Yo approached Barbara Hall, the mayor of Toronto at the time, with the idea of building the garden down at Harbourfront instead. "In the mayor's office, Yo-Yo played the cello suites and described how each different environment would work. He would be saying things like, 'Imagine walking through a forest. Imagine children running.' To this day, Barbara says that was the best meeting she took as mayor." That was all very nice, but it wasn't the ending that Fichman had hoped for. "I had a film to deliver. Barbara said we could get a plan approved for the following year and have the garden completed in two. I said, 'TVOntario is broadcasting this in the fall.'" Hall was taken aback by the idea that a municipally based project would have to be completed on a schedule for prime-time television. "Take it or leave it," Fichman said, and to her credit, Hall stepped up to the plate.

The impetus for the "no compromise" clause is, in Fichman's mind, a matter of sheer will. But do sheer will and sheer ego differ? Technically, will is a passionate desire, a noun and a verb, while ego is an aspect of self-esteem. There is, after all,



Patricia Rozema's *Six Gesturas*; Photo by Cylla von Tiedemann.

no such thing as "team ego" while there is collective will. On a practical level, for both Fichman and Yo-Yo, the garden was about getting the project done. On an ideological level, the garden was about the city. Years after the garden's completion and the many awards for *Yo-Yo Ma Inspired by Bach* (including a Prime Time Emmy for Patricia Rozema's contri-

bution, *Six Gestures*) Fichman runs through the garden every morning, humming the music as he goes. "The determination to do this wasn't about glorifying myself."

The need to complete is something Fichman believes was instilled as a child—that and a sense of creation, a sense of community. "I would fight to the death for certain things," he explains. Born in Tel Aviv in 1958, his values come from his parents and his Israeli heritage. Fichman's father is an engineer who would have been a pianist had family pressures not steered him in a different direction. His mother was a grade school teacher, and his brother ultimately did become the concert pianist as well as the subject of Fichman's first film, *Opus One, Number One* (1978), made in conjunction with Willis Sweete. It's his sister, with the house in the suburbs, who teaches ballroom dancing with her husband and has a mainstream career, who he describes as being "probably the happiest of us all."

From the age of 10 Fichman was behind a camera. At the time it was his father's movie camera and he was filming "stupid public school dramas," he recalls, suddenly a little self-conscious. The present day Niv Fichman resides comfortably with the classical masters—Bach, Ravel, Satie and Prokofiev—and the abrupt linkage to a North York public school performance of rank amateurs is making him smile. "They weren't school plays," he adds, realizing he sounded like he'd lurk in a darkened gymnasium with a Kodak during a performance of *West Side Story*. "They were dramas I created." Back on track, reputation intact, he continues, "I could be really bossy as a producer. There I was, the immigrant kid and kind of insecure about that, but through movies, I could choose the most popular kids and offer them a whole day off school and still get a mark for the project. If you could do that, you were a god." As far back as his early teens, Fichman was able to size up an environment and make it a sanctuary for himself. Formative years, indeed. Now he concedes that thoughts of breaking free of the Rhombus collective have bubbled up to the surface unbidden. But they are resistible for a variety of reasons, one of which is the security of the corporate blanket. "It's not only the reputation of the company, which is very good because Rhombus is a known entity in Canada and in certain circles internationally. Yes, it's good to be from Rhombus, and this environment has everything I need to do the work that I do."

The autonomy of the Rhombus design (they develop, produce, direct, finance and distribute) is rare in an operation of its size. "We tend to be fairly isolated within our own world. We don't measure ourselves against anyone else except ourselves. To measure up to the films that we've made, keeping the same freshness and quality, it's a huge amount of pressure particularly when financing for those kinds of films is constantly shrinking and shifting. But after 23 years, we have something that is really extraordinary and we want to preserve it."

A noble thought, but on a personal level another motivation keeps him where he is—contentment. "If I had to start a company now from scratch, it would be much more business-oriented and much more cutthroat, while Rhombus is very soft. Here, I'm the thinker. I'm the one with the highfalutin ideas and I get whacked down every once in a while, which is good for me. But it's okay because the checks and balances are organic. We've grown up together, so I can listen, I can be balanced and not feel defeated. In other situations I can be as big as I want

*Stormy Weather: The Music of Harold Arlen;*  
Photo by Viliam Hrubovcak.



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Yo-Yo Ma Inspired by Bach;  
Photo by Ana Gerltz.



and if I'm defeated, then I'll just move on. The bottom line for me is that if I ever think I'd be better off doing what I'm doing without this company, the answer is always no because this company provides a real home and a real shelter."

A measure of Fichman's contentment is the number of projects he is simultaneously working on. Features and television projects jockey for top of mind position. *Blindness*, originally planned to go into production in 2001, has now been moved because McKellar is still "with script." Fichman is sanguine.

"Don, as you know from *Last Night*, is very interested in exploring apocalyptic themes, so this is a natural. We were finishing *Last Night* when he said he wanted to do this," he explains. The decision is bolstered by *The Globe and Mail's* recently published list of the top 100 books, which puts *Blindness* in the same category as Shakespeare.

Vying for attention is *The Saddest Music in the World*, based on the novel by Kazuo Ishiguro (*Remains of the Day*). This feature, to be written and directed by Guy Maddin, has Fichman in a holding pattern. The script is a week late. Apparently calm

(and justifiably because a message slip is waiting at the end of the interview saying the script is ready) Fichman is braced for the experience. Ever since Maddin shot his multiple-award-winning *The Heart of the World* from *Preludes*, a brilliant 35-minute film edited tightly into five that left critics and audiences gasping for breath, the producer has been intent upon doing a feature with this director. This could have happened sooner because Fichman was up for it, but he appears, again content, to wait until all the stars are lined up properly.

The long workup on *The Stone Diaries* based on the Carol Shields' novel and scripted by Semi Chellas, is now complete but has been put on hold due to extenuating circumstances. Fichman is utterly committed to the project and will go forward with director Cynthia Scott (*The Company of Strangers*) as soon as the situation clears. Meantime, Fichman has *Countdown*, a short film by Nathan Morlando, which is finishing post-production and has sparked Rhombus's interest in making more short films. Additionally, Fichman is traveling to China to meet up with François Girard for preliminary work on *Far Road*, a feature based on a book by George Johnston about two journalists at the end of the Second World War who go on an assignment to China and uncover a genocide.

Between these feature films in development and the many television projects slated and heading into production, which is enough to entirely fill the back page of *Playback*, there is the six-hour comedy series, *St. Ratford* (a behind-the-scenes parody of Stratford), plus *Elizabeth Rex* (directed by Willis Sweete), as well as *Stormy Weather*, about the composer Harold Arlen. This is good for Fichman because it fits with the design capacity of his brain and his energy level. There are also 10 or 12 television projects in the works and another dozen in lesser stages of development. It doesn't go by numbers, it goes by limits, and Fichman has reached his. He needs to be involved. He requires an intensity level, but the title of executive producer rankles. It's the word "executive" that annoys him. Too corporate, because he approaches something first from the creative side. "I produce. It's a verb, not a credit."

Fichman is finding a comfortable place within himself these days. The path presents itself and so long as he follows it with good intentions, the results are very satisfying. "And, when I think about it, I still 'get out of class,' like in school. I travel all over the world and I'm gone at least half the time. I get criticized for it all the time. But in order to meld into the world of a new project, you need to be there to know what the people are doing. I was just in Nova Scotia for our CBC special on the 11-year-old singer Aselin Debison. So, sure, I 'skip class' all the time."

TAKE ONE