

# Victor Nunez May Be the Best Director Most People Never Heard of — but Stanley Kubrick and Ava DuVernay Have

Todd Field, Ashley Judd, Ed Harris, and Josh Brolin reflect on working with the "Ruby in Paradise" and "Ulee's Gold" director ahead of his American Cinematheque retrospective.

BY JIM HEMPHILL

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"Ulee's Gold" ©Orion Pictures Corp/Courtesy Everett Collection Share

“I remember seeing a film that became really formative for me called ‘Ruby in Paradise.’ It was a film about a young woman finding herself. It’s a simple film. A beautiful film. And I thought, ‘Wow. I didn’t know a film could be like this.’ I’d never seen anything like this before.”

That was director [Ava DuVernay](#) in the documentary “Only in Theaters” talking about “Ruby in Paradise,” winner of the Grand Jury Prize at the 1993 Sundance Film Festival and one of several exquisitely crafted dramas from Florida writer-director [Victor Nunez](#). Since his feature debut “Gal Young Un” in 1979, Nunez has slowly, quietly, and consistently built one of the American independent cinema’s most vital bodies of work, one centered around complex regional

character studies like “Ruby” and its follow-up “Ulee’s Gold,” for which Peter Fonda was nominated for an Oscar.

These films, along with Nunez’s 1984 masterpiece “A Flash of Green,” will be screened at the American Cinematheque in Los Angeles on July 8 and 9 as part of a long overdue tribute to Nunez, who will appear in person along with actors from his films including Ashley Judd, Ed Harris, Todd Field, and Lori Singer, the star of Nunez’s new film “Rachel Hendrix.” That film, in which Singer’s character struggles to let others into her life following the death of her husband, will have its L.A. premiere at the retrospective.



*“Ruby in Paradise” ©October Films/Courtesy Everett Collection*

DuVernay is hardly the only important director moved by Nunez’s work. “Within the first 30 seconds of meeting Stanley Kubrick for the first time, he said, ‘Tell me about Victor Nunez,’” Todd Field told IndieWire. “I said, ‘Well, from what I understand he works a lot like you. It’s just him and the actors with the tiniest amount of technical support. He operates his own camera and it’s a very different manner of working than normal industrial filmmaking.’ Stanley seemed really pleased to hear that, but of course when I told Victor he said, ‘Me and Stanley Kubrick? We couldn’t be more different.’ But they’re actually very, very similar.

The aim is different, but the methodology has a relationship in terms of priorities of process.”

The fact that Nunez does prioritize character and performance is probably why so many actors have done some of their best work in his films; Ashley Judd in “Ruby in Paradise,” Peter Fonda in “Ulee’s Gold,” and Ed Harris in “A Flash of Green” are just a few examples. Operating himself and often working in the super-16mm format with high-speed film stocks, Nunez creates an intimate style filled with visual texture that comes from the unusual properties of his grain and the way it interacts with light as well as his dedication to photographing parts of America not often seen on screen — and photographing them with the same love with which he approaches his characters.



„A Flash of Green“©International Spectrafilm/Courtesy Everett Collection IFC

For Judd, shooting on location with Nunez in Panama City, Florida, was an integral part of her process. “The immediacy of real life was just very present,” she told IndieWire. “There was no distance between reality and the film set.” The sensitivity toward the locations and their residents in Nunez’s films that is easily felt by the viewer was just as obvious on set, according to Harris. “He has such strong feelings for Florida and its people and the local environment,” Harris told IndieWire. “His love for where he lives and the way that he cares about it creates a great environment full of detail, and it just gives you that much more as an actor.”

Field added that it wasn't just the immersion into the world of "Ruby in Paradise" that helped his performance, it was Nunez's guidance *through* that world. "Actors love research, but typically that work is self-directed," he said. "But with Victor, you had someone guiding you very specifically and saying, 'Welcome to my world.' That was a very powerful experience." Josh Brolin, who worked with Nunez on "Coastlines," felt the same way about that film's St. George Island location. "I took a lot of pictures around there and I got to know a lot of people," he told IndieWire. "I hung out with a lot of cops, which Victor helped set up. I hung out with a lot of fishermen in the area. It was a great vibe — I don't think a typical movie would have shot there."



*"Coastlines" ©IFC Films/Courtesy Everett Collection*

Brolin learned just how atypical Nunez's process was early on in the shoot, when he forgot a line and called out for it. "I called out for a line and nobody said anything," Brolin said, "and Victor came up to me and said, 'We're not doing the Hollywood thing. We're not a typical crew, we've created our own paradigm. We don't have a script supervisor.' And I was like, 'The one job you chose not to have is the script supervisor? To me that's the most important job on the set!'" After that slightly combative start, Brolin came to appreciate Nunez's approach and tight-knit team. "He created an incredible crew, and they were undyingly loyal to him."

Harris, who had one of his first leading roles in “A Flash of Green,” said that the environment Nunez created on set immediately put him at ease. “Victor has worked with a lot of the same people over the years, and it’s like joining a family,” Harris said. “It’s a very warm, embracing environment. There are no big egos involved and Victor is very generous and very humble.” Nunez’s generosity often extends to inviting his collaborators into parts of the process they might otherwise be excluded from. Harris recalled being welcome in the editing room, and Field said that as soon as Nunez learned he was about to study directing at the AFI, the first thing that he did was invite Field to look through the camera. “That was very much like Stanley too,” Field said. “Someone who was confident enough in what they were doing to not have any arbitrary boundaries in terms of disciplines.”



*"Ruby in Paradise" ©October Films/Courtesy Everett Collection*

The democratizing impulse that Nunez’s collaborators describe is clearly felt in the work, in which there’s a deep empathy for characters across a wide variety of economic and racial backgrounds. There’s also a deeply personal dedication to exploring social issues, but as Judd pointed out, these are not message movies. “Victor’s films are incredibly intelligent, but it’s instinctive and organic,” she said. “‘Ruby in Paradise’ is a feminist film, with Ruby dealing with all the things you would read about in feminist texts and theory or learn about in consciousness-raising groups. The movie is about sexual violence, poverty, the

lack of educational opportunities through class, but Victor doesn't tell you. He shows you, and he does it so beautifully that no one realizes he's doing it."

"Victor was also at the forefront of inclusive filmmaking," Judd added, noting that many of his films focused on women and people of color at a time when few other American filmmakers did so. "There are so many astute observations about daily life, expressed in the most subtle ways."

This intersection between the personal and the political and the visual poetry with which Nunez explores it makes his work essential viewing for anyone who cares about American independent cinema and how it reflects the culture — which in turn makes the Cinematheque retrospective and the arrival of a new Nunez film cause for celebration. "There's a kind of arbitrariness to who's involved in the conversation about the canon of the American cinema and who isn't — there are winners and losers," Field said. "But I also think the pursuit of a kind of cinema that isn't on everyone's lips is super exciting. Victor Nunez is standing right under our noses and we can't even see him. If you like a cinema that's thoughtful and caring and you haven't heard of Victor Nunez, then it's important that you see his work."