IN PROXIMITY
Episode 3: Aneesh Chaganty and Sev Ohanian
Final Transcript

[Music/Old Radio Sounds by Ken Nana]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're listening to P-R-O-X.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Sev Ohanian: But on this next one, it's a heist movie set in the real world. So there's a grounded element to it, and it's, it's almost like, for you and I to write, "How would people pull off this heist?" you and I essentially had to --

Aneesh Chaganty: To learn how to do it.

Sev Ohanian: Literally.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: And that involved you and I flying all over the country. We've literally tried to get access into the space that our characters try to.

Aneesh Chaganty: It didn't work.

Sev Ohanian: Did not work.

Aneesh Chaganty: So we wrote a movie.

Sev Ohanian: Exactly.

[In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're listening to In Proximity.

Proximity founder Sev Ohanian and his writing partner Aneesh Chaganty first broke out with the 2018 independent film Searching. It follows David Kim, played by actor John Cho, as he searches for his missing daughter Margot. David soon learns he barely knows his daughter as he discovers the completely different life she's lived online as the story unfolds entirely through screens: browser windows, instant messages, surveillance footage, and more. It's an innovative mystery thriller that also captures the challenges and vulnerabilities of modern technology.

Searching was written by Sev and Aneesh, directed by Aneesh, and produced by Sev and their producing partner Natalie Qasabian. The film premiered at Sundance where it won several awards, and it was acquired by Sony Pictures in a bidding war. It went on to make $75 million dollars in theaters globally.

Sev and Aneesh then wrote the script for Run, a psychological thriller directed by Aneesh and produced by Sev starring Kiera Allen and Sarah Paulson released in 2020. They also co-wrote the story for Missing, the sequel to Searching that premiered in January 2023 starring Storm Reid, Nia Long, Ken Leung, and more.

On this episode, Sev and Aneesh break down their writing partnership and process, beat by beat, how they met, how they work together, and how they write stories for the screen from one sentence idea to finished script.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[MUSIC STOPS]

Sev Ohanian: Hey, everybody, this is Sev Ohanian. I am a sometimes screenwriter, sometimes producer, always Founder at Proximity Media here with another episode of In Proximity. I'm here with my very good friend and writing partner, Aneesh Chaganty, and we're actually at the Proximity Media offices.

Aneesh Chaganty: My name is Aneesh Chaganty. I'm a writer and director.

Sev Ohanian: And producer now.

Aneesh Chaganty: And producer, but, you know, I don't flaunt that one because you guys are the producers. And today, talking about my writing relationship with Sev Ohanian, who I've been in proximity with for the last 10 years.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah, we did meet in 2012, I think, Spring semester at USC School of Cinematic Arts. And I was a TA. So you weren't necessarily in my class, but I was happy to be there.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah. That's true. It was a producing class that I had to take as a requirement in order to direct the next semester, and we just hit it off. We just connected on our favorite movies, our favorite moments, what in a script was working or what wasn't. You were just also killing it as a producer. You were the kind of guy who was just working on everything. And, I guess, from my point of view, you had gone off, produced Fruitvale Station with Ryan, who was another USC student, and you had come back having won Sundance with it. And I was just like, okay, I have to find a way to work with this guy. And I emailed you or texted you, wanting to take you out to, like, celebratory drinks. And I had five ideas for a feature film.

I told myself, like, "I'm going to pitch all of them to Sev casually in this conversation." And if he liked any one, or whichever one he liked the most, I would just say it was my favorite and see what happened. And I eventually pitched one, and you were like, "You know, I really like that idea." And I was like, "No way! That's, like, my favorite one." And slowly, that became a texting relationship about this idea, which became an email relationship and a phone call relationship, and slowly and slowly, we were kind of putting the building blocks of what would become our first screenplay and our only unproduced screenplay that we've ever written together.

[LAUGHTER]

Sev Ohanian: I remember that, after Sundance, there was a good number of people who did reach out and wanted to get together for whatever reason.

Aneesh Chaganty: After Fruitvale Sundance.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah, yeah, after Fruitvale, 2013 Sundance, yeah, when our movie, Fruitvale Station, premiered, and we got acquired and all that. And I remember very specifically you reaching out because I was always drawn to you when you were a student in the class—in addition to us having like-minded sensibilities when it came to filmmaking and taste, I just always remember you were kind of like a fun student. Like, you were often the one who would get excited about things, and, you know, your energy was definitely infectious. So I was down to get those drinks with you, and I remember we got the drinks at what they call Traddy's.

Aneesh Chaganty: Traddy's, yeah.

Sev Ohanian: Which was, like, the, the USC student campus bar. In fact, I think we have it in our calendar --

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah, you do.

Sev Ohanian:—as, like, a recurring event every year, of, like, celebrating. And I did not know at the time that you were starting the foundation of our partnership on a lie. That's information that I learned many, many years later as—actually, it was at Sundance.

Aneesh Chaganty: At Sundance. Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: While we were there with our movie Searching, we were doing interviews, and somebody asked us to, like, "Tell each other something you've never told each other before." And I said, "You know, Aneesh, I just respect you," blah, blah, blah. And you're like, "Hey, Sev, I lied to you, bro. Like, I was going to say any of those projects was my favorite."

Aneesh Chaganty: That was five years ago, so halfway into our relationship.

Sev Ohanian: Oh, my gosh. Wow. Yeah, so I remember—you had this really cool idea. It was just a log line, I think, or even, like, the smallest of a concept, but I was really drawn to it. It felt to me like, "Man, that would make for a really good movie. It would make for a lot of cool visuals, really cool stakes. I've never seen that before." And it wasn't, like, an overnight thing. It wasn't like that night, we, like, clinked our glasses and said, "Let's write this movie together."

It was more like, "Cool. Let's just keep chatting," but, like you said, over many, many weeks of texting or emailing, and you were quite persistent, I remember, in a really cool way, that I started looking forward to, like, hearing from you because I was so into the idea. And I can immediately tell that we were on very similar wavelengths with this. And I think you had written one script before with someone else?

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: Who—you had shared with me that script. I always remember that you refused to email it to me.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah, so dumb. So—yeah.

Sev Ohanian: You insisted on watermarking it, printing it out, and dropping it off.

Aneesh Chaganty: So dumb. The only executive, also, I ever knew. Like, I literally delivered it to him in a manila envelope.

Sev Ohanian: Yes.

Aneesh Chaganty: And I slid it over to him at and I was like, "Hey, can I—and I'll take that back after you read it." I just was so obsessed with M. Night Shyamalan.

Sev Ohanian: That's so funny.

Aneesh Chaganty: And I was like—I had read so much about how protective he is about the script. So I was like, "This one has be protected." And now it's like, yeah, that thing could've been found, and it would've just been recycled.

Sev Ohanian: Hey, it was a good script. So, yeah, next thing you know, we're like, "We should just start writing the script together." And I had written one feature film of my own many years before, just on my own. I knew in my mind, and, you know, this is me having just co-produced a movie that did quite well, and I was—I could see the path ahead of me working as an independent film producer, and I could see, like, "Okay, I've got to do these kinds of movies and, eventually, I make a movie of my own that can blow up – all of that was clear to me.

But what wasn't clear was how I could ever be a screenwriter because that was something that I had as a deep passion. And, like I said, I had written a movie before that had done well on a very, like, cult level kind of success. That was My Big Fat Armenian Family, a movie I wrote and directed about my own life that found a good amount of success in the Armenian community. But when it came to quote/unquote "real" movies, I didn't have a plan. And here was this really talented student you know, now friend, who—we were very like-minded, and I knew even beyond our taste in films, like, you're Indian, I'm Armenian, but there's a lot of similarity there. And I just remember it was kind of like plunging right into it. It was like, "All right, so what's the opening?"

[MUSIC FADES IN]

In this particular movie, which is called Animal Heist, it's a story about the world's greatest thief who gets pulled into the wildest job ever, which is to steal a 400-pound gorilla from the L.A. Zoo to save its life. You know, studios, please, you can line right up.

Aneesh Chaganty: We were so confident. We were like, "This is going to start a bidding war. This is it. This is our ticket."

[Interstitial Music by Ludwig Göransson]

Sev Ohanian: Writing that script really did establish the foundation of how we have then gone on to write. We wrote Searching together. We wrote Run together. These are two movies that have come out and, you know, have found good success, honestly.

And then we co-wrote the story treatment for Missing, which is a follow-up to Searching. Having gone through this experience multiple times, while the process has shifted in all the obvious ways and lessons learned, it has kind of been roughly the same. Let's break it down. Like, usually, there's the single-sentence idea for a project. It's like, a single line, "Hey, what about a movie about a child who, like, learns that the mother has been keeping a deep, dark secret from

them, and it's about their own health?" And it's like, we've talked about tons of ideas, but these ideas come as just a single sentence.

Aneesh Chaganty: I feel like you were always—or are always good at seeing the potential of a sentence. Can you find an idea that within one sentence or a paragraph, you can clearly communicate why this concept is more elevated than the traditional approach of that same story?

Sev Ohanian: To me, the best idea is when I just see it. Like, I know what Act 1 is, I know what Act 2 is, I know what Act 3 is. And, like, I can see the twists and turns and—like, in that single sentence in Missing, which is a sequel to Searching, it's, okay, the daughter, this time, is looking for the parent.

Aneesh Chaganty: And that idea was placed against other ideas that we also had, but you always knew what that idea was.

Sev Ohanian: Like, is there enough meat on the bones? Is there enough for theme? Is there enough for cool sequences? And that is a usually short process. The period that I just look forward to always, and even, you know, when we're past that point, I still look back towards it—is the blue skies period.

Aneesh Chaganty: Blue skies, yeah.

Sev Ohanian: And what that looks like for you and I—and oftentimes, we're not even in-person. You know, I'll be traveling, or you'll be living in New York or whatever. It's just long phone calls. Like, there's very little structure to it. We get on a phone call, and it's like, "Okay, so guy looking for his missing daughter using her computer. That's all we got. Tonally, is this a Taken? Is there, like, violence? Is he using action to get her? Probably not."

And it's like, "Okay, more of a mystery." Like, okay, well, if this is a real movie, not a computer movie, in Searching's case, Act 2 is probably when he begins the search in earnest. So then what does that make Act 1? And it's like, well, I guess half of Act 1 is when she goes missing. So then what is he doing for the rest of Act 1? And we realized, well, she could be missing; he just doesn't know it yet. And there's a tension in that. And we started to realize, well, wait, if that's the case, then what's this movie about? It's actually about him realizing he doesn't know his daughter.

And, like, these are the conversations that I look forward to all the time. You and I writing a single movie as writing partners, it's really like you and I are writing like 10 movies because just in the process of trying to find the right movie, we've gone way down the path of other ideas, of other versions. It's exhausting, but I do find it exhilarating.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah. In that blue sky process, the thing that is most important to come out of is understanding what are the five most important inflection points or plot points in the narrative, meaning: what is our inciting incident? What is our break to two? What is our midpoint? What's our break three, and then what's the ending of the movie? You know, like, understanding those is a lot of the fun of this blue sky process. And then we get to outlining, in which case there's more of that, and we just spend a variable amount of time—we've spent two months on outlining. We have spent six months on outlining, and in our last project, most recent project, we spent a year and a half to two years on outlining.

Sev Ohanian: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Aneesh Chaganty: Each one is different as to when you know you're done with it.

Sev Ohanian: And, you know, we've been, by trade so far, like, writers who write on spec, you know like when a writer, of their own volition, sets out to write a full script, they're not being paid to write it. They haven't pitched it as an idea. They're kind of not on the hook. They're entirely writing it with no guarantee that they'll ever see money for it. The benefit of doing that is when you have a good script that you finish writing, you now have a piece of content, a piece of material that you can leverage with the right packaging to set it up and sell it. So, you know, that is how you and I tend to write. We take our time, and I do think time is part of the recipe, undeniably.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: And a lot of our structure is based on Blake Snyder's Beat Sheet from Save the Cat.

Aneesh Chaganty: I would call it, like, the gateway to screenwriting education.

Sev Ohanian: Mm-hmm, totally. I'm a big believer in the idea that your movie's log line is Act 2A. So it's like, what is it? If it's a guy searching for his missing daughter, that's when that happens. And this girl's trying to figure out a mystery about her mom, that's when that happens. And then the midpoint, obviously, like you said, we got to just hit those milestones, and then we start fleshing it out.

And we use Google Drive. We make chapter titles for every one of our scripts, and we're not even touching final draft usually until after the outlining, which mostly happens on Google Docs. I mean, let's, let's talk about what that feels like.

Aneesh Chaganty: It's funny. Sometimes it's an outline. On Run, it was a beat sheet. Think of a beat like a moment in a story, an inflection point, a moment where a character's emotion changes or a decision changes. And basically a beat sheet is a chronological line of events and moments in the story that all add up to the story itself.

Sev Ohanian: Run, it was, like, literally a spreadsheet.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah, with cells.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah, it was like Microsoft Excel style.

Aneesh Chaganty: opening image, every image because the whole movie, we always knew, was such a—I like to call it a left to right movie where, like, every immediate action is constantly affecting the next action.

Sev Ohanian: So, if that was not on a computer, it would've been postcards on a wall, for instance.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah, on a wall. Yeah, totally.

Sev Ohanian: Exactly, yeah.

Aneesh Chaganty: And then this next one, we just—yeah, I think we started being—being like, okay, inciting incident one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, and, like, writing big paragraphs. Immediately goes to you. You mark it up, you know, like there's more notes than there is words, generally, two to one.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah.

Aneesh Chaganty: And then we'll talk about it, and then we'll figure out on this call what to do about it.

Sev Ohanian: And it's all very iterative.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: Oftentimes, we'll leave something knowing it probably needs to get far more work done, but we'll come back on it. And I think the benefit of being a writing partnership and so often is that we'll compete with each other and disagree with each other. And that conflict, I've found, has really breeded good material.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: Our conflict is always on the story, never on ego. It's never like, "My idea's got to win because it's mine." It's, "We got to find the right idea."

Sev Ohanian: Let's say we'll end a call saying, "Okay, I really think, in this outline scene, it should be red," and I'm saying it should be blue. And those are two things where it's mutually exclusive. It has to be either one or the other. We'll often hang up, and then the next time we chat, it's almost like we're going to court.

Aneesh Chaganty: And this is one thing I love about our outline phase. I really like being able to hang up and, like, "Ugh!" you know what I mean? Like, do that, you know?

Sev Ohanian: Sure, sure.

Aneesh Chaganty: Or just, like, why didn't he see the same page? Blah, blah, blah, and then you spend all day thinking about it. "Sev, when can you talk next? What are your avails?" Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and then, first thing you get on the phone, "Okay, I've been thinking about it since we last hung up," and you have a different approach to it. But, like, that ability to disconnect from each other and vent or have a life or do whatever and reconvene has been so productive for our outlining process.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah. Yeah, and when we reconnect, we're bringing, a pitch to each other, and it's not just, "Hey, what about this?" It's like, "Hey, we start with X, and then we do Y, and then we do Z, and then this happens, and that's why that happens." And that's—like, we're really bringing homework that oftentimes, I will convince you or you will convince me, and then we feel good about it. And this all comes up quite a bit in the feedback process that we've established.

[Interstitial Music by Ludwig Göransson]

Sev Ohanian: So for Searching 1, the first movie that we wrote together after that initial one, we established this really radical way of getting feedback which was we prepared a Google spreadsheet that had three sections to it, like what we called General Questions, Macro Questions, and Micro Questions.

And the General Questions were, "What did you think of the movie? What was the fastest part? What was the slowest part? Can you give a rating when it comes to characters, to the ending, to the whatever?" The Macro Questions were, "How would you characterize David Kim's arc?" you know, like, or, "What did you think about the relationship that David had with his daughter?" Or, "What'd you think about the mystery? What'd you think about this particular revelation?"

Then the Micro Questions is where it gets really insane. It's like, "Okay, on page three of your script, there's this one line the character says. Did you laugh at that line?" "Oh, on page 26, did you understand what this beat was meaning to say, or were you confused? Did you want to understand it? Are you okay being confused?" And came up with this crazy spreadsheet.

Aneesh Chaganty: That's like 170 questions by the end of it, you know?

Sev Ohanian: Oh, yeah, and when we would send the script to friends, we would ask them, like, "Hey, we'd love for you to read our script, but just heads-up, we're going to have a call with you, and we're going to ask you 1,000 questions." And that's exactly what we did. We had people read the script, and we would get on a call with them, and we would just have the phone on speaker, and you or I are taking notes.

And we would just mine information and really understand what was working and what was not because when I was an indie producer, I would always read every script desperately wanting to love the script but always finding moments that would just bump for me. And, like, a bump would be something that didn't, you know, register the way I thought it should have, or I'm like, "I can't tell if I'm supposed to feel this way," or the line was clunky. And I was really determined to have our scripts read really well and be tight.

And we would get six or seven readers at a time, and we would compare their answers, and you and I would analyze the spreadsheet, and we would highlight in yellow, "Oh, yeah, that joke did not land." Or, like, if you and I were feuding about something, being like, "Hey, this beat, people are going to get it or people are not going to get it." It's not, like, the biggest sample size but just, you know, four or five trusted readers, three out of the five were confused. That is enough for us to want to make changes.

And in this outline phase, sometimes if you and I cannot land on an agreement, usually one of us will concede and be like, "All right, well, let's just see what happens in feedback." And, you know, half the time it works, half the time it doesn't, but either way, we always walk away with important data that when we submit, eventually, a script to buyers or to actors or to whoever, there's a little bit more confidence that we'll have that, okay, we have a good feeling that those beats that we were—are so important to us, we know that they're going to register.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah. We've done this with Searching. We did it with Run. We're doing it with our next film. At every stage of it, not just the first draft, but if there's a second draft, we'll get five more people, six more people. And I was looking through those files today before this, and I was just like, dude, it's incredible. Like, you see the dates of the questions, and every tab is a different person reading for that draft. And then the questions, when you solve them, eliminate. So each draft you're in, it's asking less and less. 170 questions becomes 100

questions becomes 50 questions becomes 10, you know? And so it, it's such an interesting process to see what people think of it, and by the end of it, yeah, you're just going out with a little bit more awareness of what are the flaws, or what are the things that work really well?

[Interstitial Music by Ludwig Göransson]

Sev Ohanian: When we switch to the final draft phase, like, one thing that I have noticed, when we were initially writing together, I mean, like, our early days of being writing partners, you would often write a scene and send it to me. And I would basically rewrite it almost from scratch. And as we've done every movie, as we moved on and on and on, I have less rewriting to do. I think we've just naturally merged into each other's voices.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: By the way, I'm realizing we haven't talked about our research phase, which we go pretty hard on research. And I do think one of the mistakes that I have seen oftentimes with writers is that they go so hard on their research that the research ends up becoming the writing.

Aneesh Chaganty: You always say this.

Sev Ohanian: And it's so important to not fall into that trap. You know, the research should inform the story, but it shouldn't become the story. And I think don't let yourself have your characters do or say things just because you've seen that that's actually how it goes. Like, that has to still ultimately, you know, tell the narrative that you were trying to tell and, you know, fit into the theme, obviously. But on this next one, it's a heist movie set in the real world. So there's a grounded element to it, and it's almost like, for you and I to write, "How would people pull off this heist?" you and I essentially had to --

Aneesh Chaganty: To learn how to do it.

Sev Ohanian: Literally.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: And that involved you and I flying all over the country. We've literally tried to get access into the space that our characters try to.

Aneesh Chaganty: It didn't work.

Sev Ohanian: Did not work.

Aneesh Chaganty: So we wrote a movie.

Sev Ohanian: Exactly. We have somehow found, through the power of the internet and friends and friends and friends—we've talked to lawyers. We've talked to ex-government people. We've talked to mechanics. We got a tour of the Ford factory at one point because that was going to be a big thing. We really did our homework on this thing.

Aneesh Chaganty: And sometimes it also happens in the writing where it's like, you realize, like, at the end of the day, the character's going to do what they want to do, and sometimes you realize, like, what the outline said was what you want them to do. How do you marry the two of

them? And sometimes that opens it up to a whole new questions back into research, and you're like, "Shit, did we just do this whole thing to take too long?"

But, yeah, research is such a process. Especially on this last film, it just took so long, but it's fascinating because sometimes 90% of research is like, "Well, this idea wouldn't work," and then I hang up the call and be like, "Well, obviously that didn't work. And Sev would be like, "No, there's still one way we could make our idea work." I think one thing that we often do with research is we—we don't do it in a way, like, let's just collect all the data we can and find a story. We usually have a POV.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah, exactly.

Aneesh Chaganty: You know, we're like—we're going in with, like, a, "Can character do X, Y, Z to accomplish B?" or whatever, right?

Sev Ohanian: And they'll say no.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah, they'll say no.

Sev Ohanian: And well say, "Okay, but what if, gun to their head, they had to do it, like, how could they do it? And, you know, we'll get some answers. And when you watch a movie as an audience member, you feel if there's an authenticity happening on the screen. I think that's always what we're chasing. And, part of the fun is that, like, audiences walking away being like, "Wait, I never thought that was even possible," and looking it up and being like, "Dang, like, I guess it is."

Aneesh Chaganty: And sometimes if the research doesn't point us in the direction, that's where we just have to fictionalize.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah.

Aneesh Chaganty: Like, like if you look at Run, the midpoint of the film is a confirmation from the daughter that—there's a certain piece of medication that plays a big role in the film. It's completely made up, and we tried so hard to figure out how this could actually work in a narrative, like, what we wanted in the story could be accomplished by real medicine in a way that the story was changing into something we still liked, and we couldn't. So we're like, "Okay, let's just actually make the simplest version. It's a fake medicine," and suddenly, like, our story goes on, and it's as simple and neat as we've always wanted it to be.

Sev Ohanian: Exactly.

[Interstitial Music by Ludwig Göransson]

All right. So here are the steps again. I think one is the initial idea, and that's usually when one of us—historically, it's been Aneesh—has, like, hey, what about a movie about X, Y, Z, single sentence. And we entertain it, we throw it back and forth. Nine times out of ten, we throw it away, and every now and then, it becomes a movie that we want to start writing.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yep, and then it's the blue skies idea or phase, which is the portion of the process where we're just sort of throwing out every image, moment, character, plot point, feeling that we could want from this story, and we're just all throwing it at the wall. This is where I get a

Moleskin. This is where Sev's on the phone with me all the time, and we're just playing, and we're just seeing what we respond to most, seeing the things that we remember from a call from a week ago, what sticks, what doesn't stick. And then, from there, we kind of figure out: what are our sort of major moments in the story? Who are our characters, and how do we take this to the next stage?

Sev Ohanian: And, by the way, that phase also includes what we call story molecules, which is like, hey, what if there was a stock photo image who later we find out is someone else. We have no idea where it's going to go into the movie, but, ooh, that's a cool idea. And then it ends up becoming, you know, Act 3.

Aneesh Chaganty: What if our two main characters meet randomly at a random spot and have a conversation?

Sev Ohanian: Yeah, exactly.

Aneesh Chaganty: Just those kind of what-ifs.

Sev Ohanian: So then we have step three, which is outlining, and this is where we spend 90% of any project. It's similar to the blue skies, but it's a very structured towards, okay, so we're looking—we're working today on scene number 1. What are some opening images? Ooh, Aneesh has an idea. Ooh, Sev hates that idea. Okay, well, let's come up with a new idea. And that is endless phone calls, usually a Google document that is being fleshed out sometimes live, sometimes in between calls. And it's where the meat of our process is, really trying to boil down to who has a better idea as far as, like, what should happen next.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah, next step after that is taking that outline and moving it to final draft. This is the process where this idea actually starts looking like an actual screenplay. We'll start drafting scenes based on the outline we've already made, little sections of it that are organized based on the little chapters that we've already written of the outline. I'll do a pass. It goes to Sev. Sev will do a pass. Sev writes notes. It comes back to me. We'll talk about it.

Eventually, we do that piece by piece by piece by piece by piece by piece by piece of the whole thing. We put it all together. We read it again, have a thousand more notes, and once it comes to a point where we're like, "Okay, I think this is enough to go on to the next stage," we'll pass it on.

Sev Ohanian: And then we have our final stage, which is feedback. Usually, the first person who will read it is our producing partner, Natalie Qasabian. She'll give us tons of notes, which we always should listen to. Then we have feedback with the general—what we call virgin readers, which are usually friends of ours who may not even know what the movie's about. At least one or two of them who we send to are not even filmmakers, which is by design, and this is where we have a really in-depth spreadsheet of 1,000 questions—you know, realistically, 100 questions that we ask every reader to give an opinion on, and that we—we turn that into a notes document for ourselves, so we do another—another draft or two. That's when we're ready to send it out and, you know, get the movies made.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yup.

Sev Ohanian: So we got—it's like, what six steps to this process? It's like one, initial idea; two, blue skies, my fave; three, outlining with a kind of like a four, research-heavy portion of that.

Five is the final draft portion, and then six is the feedback portion. I think that kind of covers, you know, between six months to three years of how we write each script.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah, 80% of our time is in steps one, two, three, four.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah.

Aneesh Chaganty: And then 20% of our time is in five and six.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah, the final draft and, and feedback, yeah.

Aneesh Chaganty: Step eight is therapy. No, I'm joking.

[LAUGHTER]

[Interstitial Music - "Prox Recs Theme" with Ludwig Göransson Music - "Caution to the Wind"]

Sev Ohanian: So, Aneesh, we do this thing with every episode where we talk about Prox Recs, recommendations of any sort. It could be books, movies, hobbies, behaviors, tips, things that you would recommend to our listeners, maybe along the lines of forming or finding good writing partners or partnerships.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah, I was thinking about this on my way over here, and I was like, what piece of advice or tip would I give somebody beyond, like, the, Save the Cat, beyond the basic education that I think we all need to have as a baseline?

Beyond that, I think something that you did really well on Missing, back then Searching 2, when we were pitching the idea, was you pitched the trailer. And ever since then, when I think about an idea, I just think about what the trailer would be. Does the trailer convince you that this is something that you haven't seen before? And if you can't answer yes, it's important at that moment to be like, "Okay, this very worthy path that I'm going down to find something that might be good may not be the thing that, at the end of the day, is going to help the most," because—that'll be very disappointing day after you spend two years on a project only to learn that it's not quote/unquote "theatrical enough" or it's not original enough or it's not whatever enough is just to sort of, like, imagine the trailer. Is that trailer freaking sick? Because if it isn't, not going to see it in the movies. That's what I started doing.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah, that's so true. I think, for me, when you're entertaining a writing partner, the two most important qualities that I would look for is work ethic – because I think Aneesh and I both are workaholics, and when we hang up a phone call, we know that the other person is going to work infinitely harder to accomplish this idea or to overcome this argument. I don't ever want to disappoint Aneesh, and I imagine you might feel the same way because --

Aneesh Chaganty: I do feel the same way.

Sev Ohanian:—when we get on these calls, it's like, "Okay, like, I did my homework. I have my pitch," and it's not like, you know, we're just doing it to argue for argument's sake. The other thing is I think find a partner who you can have fun with because I also equally look forward to our calls because we always have a blast. And we—we make fun of our own ideas infinitely. Like, we're like—we'll pitch the stupidest stuff, and we'll just laugh about it for half an hour even though we probably should be writing on the next scene. You know, we waste the first 10

minutes of each call just catching up or, like, talking about whatever, and I think it makes it less grueling. I don't know how people do this alone sometimes, like, to be honest with you.

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah, same.

Sev Ohanian: And I'm not saying it shouldn't be done or can't be done. Obviously, it certainly is, but it is so nice to have a writing partner who I know is going to work their butt off, and it's equally, I will have a good time writing with them.

[MUSIC FADES in]

Sev Ohanian: Well, Aneesh, thank you so much, man. Thanks for having this chat with me, and thanks for coming on to In Proximity.

Aneesh Chaganty: Thank you for having me.

[In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media. If you like the show, be sure to follow, rate, and review it on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your favorite podcast app and tell your friends and loved ones to do the same. If there's someone in your life who you think might like this show, send them a link.

For more information about the films and projects mentioned on today's episode, head to ProximityMedia.com and follow @ProximityMedia on Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok.

The show is produced by me, Paola Mardo. Executive Producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, Sev Ohanian, and me. Our theme song and additional music is composed by Ludwig Göransson. Ken Nana is our Sound Designer and Mix Engineer. Polina Cherezova is our Production Assistant. Audio editing for this episode is by Judybelle Camangyan.

Special thanks to the whole Proximity Media team and to you for listening to In Proximity. Meet you back here next week.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[MUSIC STOPS]

Sev Ohanian: In the meeting, it was kind of, like, weird because now we were meeting with the head of the company, and there was executives and financiers. And they said, "We don't want to make a short," which was a bummer, "Instead, we want to make a feature-length version of your movie, take that short film idea you have and have—you guys will both write it, and we'll pay you. Sev, you'll be the lead producer, and Aneesh, we'll have you direct it. What do you say?" And then Aneesh said...

Aneesh Chaganty: No.

Sev Ohanian: I immediately tried to—I was like, "He means no problem, no can do."

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah. I mean, yeah, and he's, like, kicking me. I remember him kicking me under the table.

Sev Ohanian: Very literally, I was kicking him, like, "Bro, like, it's hard out here, man."

Aneesh Chaganty: Yeah, or like, just give me one of those, like, "Uh..."

[LAUGHTER]