

Kai

In Kai Saul's hands, the camera feels like an instrument. For the classically trained violinist, this has led to an instinctual understanding of how to master it.

"Picking up an old ARRIFLEX 16S camera for the first time was like being struck by lightning," Saul says. That was as an undergraduate music major at Dartmouth, where he'd been asked to score several student films and found himself on set. He knew little about cameras but instantly perceived that it was another conduit of artistic expression, like the violin or other instruments he grew up playing.

"That's how I found my way around the ARRIFLEX: like learning a new musical instrument, which I'd done countless times."

He consumed the works of Andrei Tarkovsky, Ingmar Bergman, and Michelangelo Antonioni and began shooting his own experimental films. After graduating with a BA in music, Saul entered the MFA program in Cinematography at Chapman University, graduating in 2012.

S A U L

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

YEARS IN GUILD: 3
LOCATION: LOS ANGELES, CA
HOMETOWN: PHILMATH, OR
PORTRAIT BY: ELISABETH CAREN

He then tried to get work with one of his mentors – Denis Maloney, ASC – with whom he'd worked as 2nd AC on several features in film school. But in one of the most important events of Saul's career, Maloney turned him down because he knew Saul wanted to become a cinematographer. He said the only way was to get out and shoot.

"That rejection was the best advice I've ever received, because it forced me to get creative with my survival and future of my career," Saul reflects. After that, he began shooting "almost anything and everything."

Though he'd originally fallen in love with the camera, it was the thrill of collaboration – with musicians, designers, or other passionate filmmakers – that convinced Saul cinematography was the right path. He went on to lens an official Sundance selection – 2018's *Home Shopper*, which was nominated for the short film Grand Jury Prize – and several other prizewinners at the Los Angeles Music Video Festival, the Berlin Flash Film Festival, and the Austin Film Festival.

"Kai's not only a true artist but a wonderful collaborator," says Dev Patel, *Home Shopper's* director. "He was totally in the trenches with me throughout the process. He has that rare ability to turn the mundane into magical. We should rename him 'Kind Soul' because he truly is an extraordinary human."

Saul recently finished principal photography on his first feature, *Flinch*, a thriller directed by Cameron Van Hoy, and regularly shoots commercials and music videos. Through it all, Saul has preserved the habits of a trained musician, especially when it comes to preparation.

"Prep time is free – the hourglass hasn't turned over yet," he says. "In preproduction, you can change your mind, sleep on ideas, or spend time revisiting your references and inspirations. But once you're on set and the clock is ticking, the worst thing you can do is to second-guess yourself. If you rely on your prep and trust your instincts, you'll be free to do your best work."



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