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One Shot at Hollywood

Actor and producer Alex Molina on filming a feature-length thriller in a single take

by Lydialyle Gibson

The film poster for *DASH* | PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF SPAM PICTURES

"A WILD RIDE." That's how Alex Molina A.R.T. '15 describes *DASH*, the film he recently helped create, currently showing online through April 17 on Cinequest, an independent film festival. A feverish and fast-paced thriller, *DASH* follows a rideshare driver during one long, bad night on the streets of Hollywood, California. Things keep getting worse for Milly—played by Molina, the star of the film as well as a producer—who drives for an Uber-like service called Dash and is juggling a secret double life, an ill-advised side hustle as a drug dealer, and a car full of passengers that include starry-eyed tourists, teenage girls, a thruple of gay men, and an intoxicated off-duty cop. Wild ride, indeed.

That description also fits the process of making the film, which unfolds over the course of an hour and 45 minutes and was shot in a single take. A camera mounted on the car's hood rolls continuously, capturing the scene inside as Milly makes one stop after another, passengers come and go, and the vise that he's trapped himself in begins to close. "You're supposed to feel kind of stuck inside the car," Moilna says. One-take films are a rarity and usually involve a camera in motion following actors through a set, sometimes swinging from one perspective to another; but in *DASH*, the frame is fixed. "So you're completely immersed."

Molina, a former University of Connecticut football player, had originally planned a career in sports psychology. But a class in public speaking accidentally launched him into theater—eventually, anyway. At first, "It scared the heck out of me," he says. "Just completely panicked." He never expected to go back in front of an audience, but after college he began applying for sales jobs and decided to audition for a play that a local theater company was putting on, as a form of "exposure therapy" to help him with the sales pitches he was already

beginning to dread. One play in Connecticut led to another and then to another, "And then this weird, creative thing started to happen," he says. "Theater seemed to fit." In stage performance, he found echoes of the psychology he'd studied in college, and echoes of his time on the football field, too: "Opening night feels like a game day." He applied to Harvard's graduate program at the American Repertory Theater (now on hiatus indefinitely) and after graduating, he moved to New York to continue his life as an actor, primarily in plays and musicals.

Working on *DASH,* Molina collaborated with his close friend, writer and director Sean Perry. Partly, the project was born out of the restlessness of the early pandemic. Cooped up in his New York apartment in mid-2020, Molina decided to take a road trip to the West Coast. "I needed to get out," he says. COVID had forced a break from his work in theater and catering, and so he just started driving toward Los Angeles, spending a couple of months camping along the way. Not long after he arrived, Perry called and said he was moving from New York to Los Angeles and that he had an idea for a movie. "He was like, 'Hang tight, don't leave,'" recalls Molina, who never moved back to New York.

The two of them spent months working out the logistics of *DASH* before even the first rehearsal: mapping and timing the car's route, tightly syncing every stop (there are about 30) with the action and dialogue in the script. There were dozens of dry runs, contingency plans for red lights (which in a couple of cases meant running them—"carefully," Molina says), and positions measured out to the inch, like blocking on a stage. During one scene when the car comes to a halt next to Hollywood Boulevard's famous El Capitan Theatre, "I knew, for instance, that my front wheel needed to line up exactly with the palm tree on the right," he explains, so that the colored lights of the theater's marquee would reflect perfectly off the windshield.

Rehearsals (conducted at first over Zoom, then using folding chairs in a cast member's backyard) were structured more like a play than a movie, with full-length read-throughs and a theater stage manager, Elizabeth Haroian, to organize the production. By the time the group began filming, Molina says, he'd memorized the entire script—his lines and everyone else's—and knew the car's route down to the second. He wore an earpiece so that Perry could yell instructions mid-performance ("Move your hand!" "Turn on the defroster!") from the lead car up ahead. In the end, they shot the film three times from start to finish. In the first take, the camera kept sliding out of position; the second take was the one they used. Molina remembers the dawning realization as the action kept rolling that night without a mistake, that "Everything's happening, everything's coming together," and the intensifying pressure to keep it going. "It's like, '*Oh my god, it's working, it's working, it's working, it's working!* And at the same time, with every second that passes, your brain is like, '*What if I mess up?*'" By the final scene, scripted as a quiet moment after the film's explosive climax, Molina's heart was pounding. In the movie, it doesn't show, though, and as Milly leans deep into the car's front seat one last time, he looks spent, maybe even relaxed, at the end of a wild ride.