

Noncompliant: A Neurodiversity Podcast with Anne Borden King

Transcript for:

Filmmakers Tony Spiridakis & Alex Plank on [the new film “Ezra”, autism and representation](#)

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Transcript by Julie-Ann Lee

[Intro music: Jazzy synth pop music]

Anne: Welcome to Noncompliant, A Neurodiversity Podcast. I’m your host **Anne Borden King**. My guests today are **Tony Spiridakis** and **Alex Plank**.

Tony is an award-winning screenwriter, director, producer, and actor with nearly four decades in the film and television industry. His most recent film, *Ezra*, which he wrote and produced alongside director Tony Goldwyn, premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival. It’s a comedic drama starring Bobby Cannavale, Robert De Niro, Rose Byrne and Whoopi Goldberg, and is being released theatrically by Bleeker Street nationwide in May 2024. We’ll be talking about *Ezra* today.

Tony’s also a father of two and a strong advocate for Autism Awareness. He supports a variety of autism related schools and organizations, including [The Help Group](#), [Exceptional Minds](#), and [We’ve Got Friends](#).

Alex Plank is a producer and actor known for *Ezra*, *The Good Doctor*, *The Bridge* and other works. He’s also well known in our community as the founder of [Wrong Planet](#), an online community for autistic people, and a place where a lot of autistic people found each other and found out more about themselves. He started it at age seventeen. And this community resource was fundamental really to the beginnings of what we know as the Neurodiversity Movement, and the still emerging understanding of autistic culture.

Today, we’re going to be talking about autistic culture, and we’re also going to be talking about *Ezra*. Alex is the Associate Producer of *Ezra*, and he did a lot of consulting on the film from a neurodiversity perspective.

Alex and Tony, welcome to the show.

Tony: Thank you.

Alex: Thank you so much for having us.

Anne: Before we get started, I just want to say a word about *Ezra*. The film is about an 11-year-old autistic kid in New York, and his maybe, probably, most-definitely neurodivergent dad and grandpa; how they manage in a world that wasn't made with autistic people in mind, navigating the institutionalized mindsets at schools and in the social work system and in the world.

My first question for you, Tony, is what was your inspiration to write this film?

Tony: it was my own, I would say bad parenting reaction to finding out that my three-and-a-half-year-old son had been diagnosed with something that I really didn't know much about, in 2002. And the world had been drastically changed by 9/11, and then there were things that were happening with my son in terms of screaming and being, you know, just being violent at times during little get-together birthday parties for four-year-olds and three-year-olds and it...it was a really good friend of mine who said, "You know, you really should have your son evaluated." And I was like, "He's gonna be turning four soon, why would he be evaluated?"

I went and did that and I remember hearing the word [autism] for the first time and thinking "okay, so how much time do we need and how much money do we throw at this problem to solve it?" And I remember the doctor looking at me and saying, "well, I think maybe in a year or two you might have a better understanding of what autism is, and your son's wonderful and you need to really figure out, you know, what this is, and it's not something you throw money at."

Anne: Wow.

Tony: And, "he's a beautiful being, and you're going to have to learn about autism" and that was the beginning of my journey.

I love that you said that the dad and the granddad [in *Ezra*] clearly are neurodivergent. I think there's some of that in me, that might be a little bit like that. But, my reaction was completely...like *there was a name for it*. I didn't like that my son's behaviour was triggering this definition, so it was very hard for me to sort of figure that out...and then I *loved* my son's sense of humor. It scared me... his outbursts were scary, you know, for quite a while -

and then when he got into school situations, he would do things and he'd be called to the principal's office. Then I'd be called to school with my wife at the time- his mom, and they would say what he did and I would burst out laughing, like "that's brilliant".

Anne: (Laughing)

Tony:

[they were giving his kindergarten class] an anti-drug seminar, from a high school senior, and Dimitry had said something to the effect of like, "she was so boring she should bring a six-pack of beer next time so that the kids could enjoy themselves, instead of being prisoners". I just thought, oh my gosh, he's a genius. And they were like, clearly there's the problem! Right? It's me! I'm the problem.

I was very dead set against them making him feel like he was a bad child, right? That was my thesis. Well, I had been a high school English teacher. I had had experience with kids to an extent. I had two sons now. One son was two years older than Dimitri at the time and I just was hell-bent on him not being vilified, right, for whatever his difference was. I was like okay, they told me three years ago that he's autistic...Like doesn't that give him a sort of pass to be a little outside the box and say funny things? Like, isn't it your job to think about what his mind is doing?

And in all of that, I started writing these things down, because I was like I'm either going to become a stand-up comedian and just do these routines about my son or, you know, I'm a screenwriter so I want to share this, these experiences which were mind-blowing to me. The people at schools who had special needs programs and had inclusion and pull out programs and all kinds of therapies were being thrown at us, they're missing a fundamental thing which is like, don't make him feel bad. Like, celebrate him! Find his super-power. He's making me laugh, so he must be making someone else laugh...

Anne: Right.

Tony: How bad could that be? And when they tried to offer medications, I'd say things like "well, look at Robin Williams...and then one of the therapists looked at me and said, "yeah, he [was] a coke addict." Of course that's not a good example to use Robin Williams. He needs to self-medicate to keep himself in check.

All these things were happening and I just kept writing them down. I started writing this like well over 12 years ago, probably 14 years ago, where it was a scene and then another scene and another scene, and then I shared those scenes when I put them together, in a writers group that has like four parents who had autistic kids and kids who are far more, you know, difficult to raise than my Dimitri. And my Dimitri was a handful, but they had, I knew that there were parents of kids that [had higher support needs] in this writer's group so I was always trying to make sure I didn't talk down to anybody.

I just shared exactly my experience and try to put it in a way that then built itself into a narrative film that had a beginning, a middle and an end, and that's where you run into the troubles of how you keep it authentic when you're trying to create a film that has its own principles of ...physics, so to speak? I mean there's got to be a structure. There's got to be an Act One ending that catapults you into the second act. There has to be a very difficult end of the second act that makes you hang onto your seat until you find out what the outcome is--that kind of thing.

So there was that difficulty and I think that's what took the amount of years that it took...when I teamed up with Tony Goldwyn before anybody else was involved, we kept doing readings and he kept wanting to understand. He's the god-father of one of my children so he's an uncle in a way to Dimitri, so he lived through all these things, watching me go through them.

Anne: Oh wow.

Tony: And so he was so careful and so wanting to not lose who I was regardless of how, off-putting it was at times (my reactions to things) because he knew at the end of the end of the day that I love my son, right, that I just want to find a place in the world for him.

The word to me is terrifying because to me it said that my son's going to be alone, right? That was what I heard. I'm Greek, I knew the root word, 'your own world' is what I heard: *aftistikósimo* [αυτιστικόςμο]--it's like "your own world". That's where the line in the film comes from, from Bobby Cannavale when he says to his best friend, Nick "It means 'in your own world', but I don't want him in his own world, I want him in this world."
[10:15]

Anne: Yeah.

Tony: And that was very much who I was, and who I had to grow into, [for] having a better understanding. I have to say having Alex on set was really wonderful because I think he and I went through these things at lunchtime when we were on set. I had a certain way of thinking about things and I would go over to Alex he'd be like, "that's not right that you're thinking like..." We kept each other in check. He would say, "Tony, that's really not appropriate" (laughing), and I'd be like, "oh be quiet...you know I'm really glad you're here, but leave me alone," that kind of thing.

Alex: I think we had a really good relationship in that sense. One thing that I really loved about your script and I think you sort of show in the film is that kind of relationship where there's the three different generations of men who each have sort of varying progressive views of things, and some of the things the older ones say are actually more on point than the younger a lot of the time. I thought that was a really beautiful part of the film.

Tony: Thank you. You know, Robert De Niro and I worked very closely for a couple of weeks. He really had to get everything right. He also has the same situation I have, except there is no "same situation," right? If you've met one autistic child, you've met one autistic child. That's how unique and different each child is. But the connection between Robert and I was strong. I had my sons at birthday parties when they were five and six years old, and his son was there...we had that little shared experience but that didn't matter. What mattered was that everything makes sense and that he understood it organically.

I remember him asking me, "So your father was like this?" and I said "no, my father wasn't at all like Stan's character,"- the character's name that Bob plays. And, he goes "Oh," and I could see he was disappointed, and I said "But, my *mother* is exactly like Stan". And he turned to me and he went, "Really?" and I went "Oh yeah, oh yeah, you didn't want to like... you had to duck to get your feet through the door." As long as he knew something was real, finding that connection for him meant everything.

It's almost like this story had to be from situations that really existed...and that's the beauty of having Alex Plank on set, right? Because Alex lived his life and had his experiences and another producer, Bill Horberg, he has a son, Diego, and he has his experience with Diego and Vera Farmiga who plays Bobby Cannavale's old girlfriend and best friend, really, in life besides Nick (the Rainn Wilson character), Vera has her experiences, so we were so blessed to have actors, artists, writers, people on our crew – so many people are affected... autism has touched them and vice versa, right?

I really felt so proud of the crew and the care. ... I think Tony Goldwyn had so much to do with this, but there was love from the top. I think Tony set a tone for all of us that really shone through I think in the film. There was absolute respect and love everywhere, and it was helpful. We had this beautiful young actor playing *Ezra*, and he was extraordinary, and he was on the spectrum and Alex was very important in helping the mom and dad who were amazing and wonderful – the Fitzgeralds – they came to the set all the time and they were a part of it, but when you have someone that young and has never acted in a film and now he’s going in to scenes with Rose Byrne and Bobby Cannavale and Robert De Niro... and he’s just so good with all of them. He’s just so... it’s just something.

Anne: I wanted to talk a bit more about the set itself because you started to talk about how the film set was made to be accessible for neurodivergent actors and crew who might be also neurodivergent and of course I’m thinking especially of **William Fitzgerald**, who not only is on the spectrum, but he’s also a child actor and it’s his first film.

Alex, how did you make sure that the set was the best it could be for, particularly for the autistic actors and crew.

Alex: What Tony said about it being from the top, I think that was really what the most important thing--and that was before I was even involved. I had discussions with Tony Goldwyn and with Bill Horberg and Tony Spiridakis and one of the things that stuck out to me was how [different it was] in an industry that usually just wants to “get the guy who knows about autism” and don’t really care if the film’s accurate.

I mean they actually cared so much and they wanted to make the lead actor an autistic actor and not try to have a neurotypical pretending to be autistic, which is literally almost every movie about autism...What we did on set was I think really special because Tony wanted to make sure that William, our actor, was respected and felt safe and felt understood. One of the phrases that we would use is ‘**nothing about us without us**’ and I think that was a pretty big part of the goal of the on-set environment. And I had my service dog, Max, too who I think really helped with the morale on set as well. That was cool.

I did trainings with the whole crew – every department head. I did separate trainings with the ADs and PAs who would be working more closely with William...and they were so great. We had such a good team. It was just fantastic.

Anne: That's amazing. You can explain to me what it would be, but things like scheduling, things like noise, sensory input and those kinds of things: How did you make that all work on the set?

Alex: Right, so one of the things that we did was prior to filming which is what we would call pre-production, we worked closely with William's parents and I gave them a sort of document to fill out that listed his different sensory issues--because as everyone who probably listens to this knows, every autistic person differs in sensory issues, so one person might be really sensitive to like, temperature... *Ezra* in the movie is not sensitive to temperature, but another autistic might be sensitive to temperature. And then some autistic people might really be sensitive to touch or sounds.

One thing that's nice about a movie set is that you do have to be quiet when they're working because of the sound consideration, so I think that helps just from the get-go. But between takes there's a lot of heavy equipment, noises of that nature. There's generators. We were figuring out the layout of the base camp, like just where would William's trailer be. Would it be closer to everyone, or would he want to be farther from the noise?

[20:11]

Alex: And then other thing was transitions, because a film set is oftentimes a dynamic environment so if things are going to change, explaining those changes to William, explaining why... because a lot of times we [autistic people] need to know why and just sort of prepping him for transitions. If he was going to have to do school at one point we'd sort of plan things around, okay now then he's going to have to transition from school and try to minimize the transitions that could be difficult, right?

And then just also just like respect. Any child actor who hasn't done [a film] before is [seen as] a risk, right, because it's very expensive on the film set. You're paying tons of people and any time wasted can add up and it can be a lot. Most kids wouldn't do as well as William did on a set even like regardless of autism, so I think there was this like feeling that maybe there would be problems and stuff but there were very few problems and they were generally not caused by William, I would say. And there's always problems on set, so.

I just think he was a really great role model for anyone out there who's worried that "oh, well maybe they can't handle the pressure of set." Well, William did great, so I was pretty happy with that. Really proud of him.

Anne: Yeah, absolutely.

Tony: Yeah. I just wanted to give so much of that credit to our First Assistant Director, Julie. she's a first AD and the first ADs and directors are absolutely the head person, but the first AD is the General that enacts all the things that need to be done and she was very attuned with the training that we learned from Alex and that she understood from learning, talking to William's parents. The big things like if you change the schedule during the day that's a big thing for William who's prepared for what's going to happen before lunch, and what's going to happen after lunch. And so if something changed, there'd be a discussion. They'd talk to William.

He felt the same way that Alex felt – a part of everything, and he was. It was very beneficial to us because he was engaged and even start to say things to Tony Goldwyn like, “you sure you want to do that next? Like maybe we shouldn't do that.”

Anne: Hmm.

Tony: He had a really surprisingly bad reaction to the horse, and it turned out to be one of the funniest things that actually turned to making the scene even better. It's when Ruby introduces Ezra to a horse for the first time. William did not take to this horse well at all and it turned out he was right. The horse was from hell!

Anne: (laughing)

Alex: The horse... that was literally what I was thinking of when I was thinking of problems that were caused on set...

Tony: Yeah.

Alex: And if you recall, Tony [Goldwyn] said “well, look this horse is, you know, highly trained – a movie horse. He's not even gonna do anything if I blow in his face.” And William was very concerned about snot. Tony demonstrated by blowing in that horse's face and that horse sneezed so much snot onto Tony's face that...

Anne: (laughing)

Alex: ...that William was like...needed a little bit of time...

Tony: I have to correct you. It wasn't just snot. That horse had eaten a bushel of apples that was just constantly there all day and people were feeding it apples all day. (laughing) And it was regurgitated apples... it was very specific. I mean it was like it was a whale, a big blue whale just shooting very bad things out of its air hole and William--I turned around and I looked for William and I saw him literally halfway through the field running. He just would not stop. Talk about fight or flight! He took off! Like, he was gone.

And we had to run after him and then like a scene later the horse is still in this corral and all of a sudden the horse goes completely bucking-bronco-crazy. And rips the posts off out of the ground.

Alex: He broke two of the fence posts like in half. And his handler dove to like hold on to the rope, because she was worried it would...

Tony: (laughing) And there was William hiding behind the other child actors going “I told you! I told you!”

Alex: He was right!

Anne: He knew.

Tony: He knew, he knew. And it turned out everybody just went with it. Yeah. I miss that crew. Don't you, Alex?

Alex: Yeah, like Danny Moder, our DP, was just incredible with William. I mean, he was so good. He also knew to like follow and get these little like moments that William would do that I don't think most DPs would have even picked up on because he took the time to understand and he was just so good about that. Everyone was so great. And I've been on quite a few different sets and not ever experienced something so loving. I've had really good experiences on set but this was the best one so far. It would be hard to beat.

Anne: Well, first of all you made it a community. You took a breath; you allowed there to be quiet. You allowed there to be the kind of conversations that you needed to have. You were prepared and you created accommodations.

I just can't help but think when I hear about the film that really any film, any filmmaker could look at this film as the model, because everything that you put into place for the autistic actors and crew actually would also be beneficial for *any* crew and actors and likewise within another setting- within schools, for example. It's this kind of intentionality, this thoughtfulness and then you can see in the film how incredibly it pays off to create something so beautiful.

Tony: Thank you. It really was; it was all those things.

We were just very fortunate...our production designer was extraordinary, Dan Leigh and again Julie held me together so many times because I was trying to keep track of things as the writer and the producer and...It was a lot.

I think Alex and I realized we weren't just *there*. We were really busy. We were really watching things and trying to help. Everybody was just doing the best they could to help. It wasn't just a normal thing that a first AD would notice that an actor didn't lift the glass a certain time...it wasn't about continuity. It was about behavior and it was just really lovely to have people thinking in the same way that we were trying to make William as at ease as he could be to just give everything and he did and he was so fluid and he improvised lines that were just... I told him "I'm happy to accept if I ever get an award, I'm happy to accept it on your behalf" (laughing).

He (Fitzgerald) wrote some hysterically funny lines that just came out of him... See now, think about that, right? Like there was a place that they were in Nebraska, this farm, and he said "oh my gosh, it looks like"... what did he say, Alex?

Alex: He said that it "looks like the start of a demon movie." And what's funny is that he was so insistent to say that line. ...Tony Goldwyn at the time was like well, you can't really say that cause you're sort of "breaking the third wall" if you're like referring to Vera Farmiga being in *The Conjuring*,...

Anne: Ah.

Alex: ...which is what he was.

Tony: He was doing that. Yeah, yeah. But it was so spontaneous and then we said "oh, we can just cut it out, just let him say it." Right?

Alex: Yeah.

Tony: Of course, in the edit room everybody just burst out laughing. And Tony [Goldwyn] looked at me and goes, "we're gonna keep that." I'm like, "of course you're gonna keep that. It's just so funny!"

I think back to my son's saying to this high school student "bring a six-pack of beer next time, if you're going to do an anti-drug seminar-- that's just boring." And, I just thought *of course, right? This is the superpower*. They don't have filters sometimes and children who are on the spectrum will just say what they're thinking (laughing).

[30:17]

Tony: I remembered all the times that Dimitri did that...that's what triggered me to start writing this thing and then here we are with this wonderful actor who's on the spectrum and just so beautifully free and doing similar things to Dimitri's behaviours.

And I'll say this, [for most of casting] we had been completely out of luck with finding the right actor to play Ezra. We were maybe a week or two away from principal photography and no one was happy with our choices, so we didn't have the lead character. You can imagine how stressful that was. Then suddenly we got a call, a tape had come in to our amazing casting directors, Kerry Barden and Paul Schnee, who've done so many great films and they got a tape and they were so excited. They contacted us and sent it to all of us and Alex and Elaine Hall... very important on the consulting side of the casting process. Elaine's a very wonderful person in the whole autism community as a teacher and a creative and we all got this tape [of Fitzgerald] and we're like, "okay, there's something here, definitely."

Then it came to the edit room and Tony went out to say hi and meet the parents, and I was sitting in the edit room and he came back in and he had gone white as a ghost. And I said, "Tony, what's wrong?" and he said, "Your son Dimitri is sitting out there and he's about to come in, so prepare yourself."

Anne: Wow.

Tony: And I'm like, what? He goes "It's Dimitri when he was 11. It's the same child." I think oh my god, and he came in and it was... he really had uncanny similarities to Dimitri. Then once Bobby Cannavale came in and sat with him and they started reading from the script, everybody kind of knew.

Alex: He was so good. One of the roles I had sort of taken up as an Associate Producer was that I wanted to make sure that his personality and character shined through. Right? I really encouraged him to say some of the things that he was doing or saying off camera, like *on* camera, right? Here's an example. I think our last day, he's wearing this dinosaur suit and they're standing by the side of the road. In between the takes he would do this really cool thing where he was sort of moving the tail back and forth with his hands. It was like a stim. [But] once the cameras turned on, he would stop doing it and I noticed that and brought it to both you [Spiridakis] and Tony Goldwyn and was like, "he's gotta do it in the scene." And it was like, 'oh yeah, that's great, let's'. You can see it in that scene, I'm sure you remember that scene where he's...

Tony: Oh, yeah.

Alex: ... in the dinosaur costume.

Anne: Mm-hmm. Yeah, I mean because if your whole life you're told to not quite be yourself and then when you get into an environment where people say "yeah" and see that beauty.

I think that anyone who's a parent of an autistic kid will understand that experience of seeing the beauty one's own child and then there are those moments of dissonance, where other people don't recognize that. They don't see like the absolute, you know, coolness of it. I think that every parent--I'm an autistic parent of an autistic kid, but any parent of an autistic kid feels that rejection. And what's really powerful about the movie I think is when Robert Cannavale's character, Max, kind of tries to escape that sense of rejection... and we all do that. We try to create spaces where we can feel welcomed and included.

The interesting thing about the film is that you created a space like that for autistic people and autism families where *for the entire span of the film* you really feel included and you really feel your experience reverberated back which is very, very powerful.

Tony: Mm-hmm. Yeah. It's something else. I mean, you trust the script up to a point and then you have to trust the actors. And I think again going back to our Director being Tony [Goldwyn] who knew the origin story, so to speak, of this fictional accounting. I completely trusted him because he had such a personal connection to that and he allowed everyone to just find it in their way.

It's the reason I wanted him to direct it. There was a time when I was going to direct this and I knew if he would direct this it would be so much better because I feel like I had too many preconceived ideas of how some things *should* be and Tony has the innate understanding--because he is an actor--to just let the actors bring it and have them find it and that made it exciting, because they were re-discovering the moments, not just saying "how can I give Tony Spiridakis what he saw in his head." It was "No, let's find this, let's talk through this" and that's what he gave everyone permission to do. And there's not a bad performance in the film.

I've made a few films that I've never been able to say that. But, I really do feel that there's not a bad performance and it's because Tony allowed people to find it in their own way, even if it was different than we might have thought it for the years that we were working on it. Trusting that is what I think reaped us just such...an authentic feeling.

I love that you said that, Anne, because that's to me that's what Tony [Goldwyn] knew from day one. He said "Tony, if we're- if we're applying our belief system here, if we're preaching to the people about anything, we won't be long for this world with this film. It's not going to make a difference. But, if we just respect it and allow it to be something truthful, and let the actors be and breathe into that, then all of a sudden, it takes on life, where people feel, "oh man, I don't know why but that felt..." like people who don't even have experiences with autism felt the authenticity of it, and then people who did have experiences with it came to us and said "thank you, this really did sound like my father, this really was my sister, this was my brother."

And more than anything, I think that's what we want the film to do is just to let people know that you're not alone, you have a community. This is one story about one family, and hopefully that triggers and helps in some way. It's just something that I felt, it's why I wanted to tell my story was to help maybe someone else know those things that I didn't know.

I remember people saying they were yelling at the screen saying "Max don't do that!" I know that's what people yelled at me when I was doing things. (laughing)

Anne: Yeah.

Tony: With Dimitri, they're like "Tony what are you doing?" I was like, "I don't know" but it just seems like I would say really terrible things to my son to just make him laugh because comedians are edgy, right? Comedians say stuff that makes us laugh and sometimes some people would be like "but *you're* not a comedian, you're his father, like, stop it!" But to me it was the only thing that I felt was a bridge from myself to his world and that's what people started to say: "Tony, you're quite autistic in your own right." And then I thought, oh, yeah well okay, whatever. All I cared about was that Dimitri... what did I use to say? "I want him to swim the other fish." And that's all a parent wants is for their child to swim with the other fish. That's all.

Anne: Yeah, but like you said, you really have to think outside the box if you have an autistic kid, because the rules that have been made around that, they need to be challenged and re-thought and there needs to be much more validation.

I think the film, like we've been talking about, it really imbues compassion in people that

don't have experience with that, but then it also validates the very unique experience that our kinds of families have.

[40:15]

Tony: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, it's...it's a ride. You know, you ride through your own self-discovery as a parent. That was a big part of this whole thing. You know, what it does to a family, which it puts so much pressure. I mean, my ex-wife and I are still advocating for our kids who are now 24 and 26, and my 26-year-old has his own issues. They both went to special needs schools in Los Angeles, and we're always discovering things and trying to figure out ways, and this is the other part of it. That's what every parent has to do. I mean I know ...

Anne: Right.

Tony: It is very particular the story to this autistic child and that's a beautiful thing and it's real and it's authentic as can be, but then what I love about seeing people's reactions is that it also speaks to parents of neurotypical children, right?

Anne: Right!

Tony: It's the impulse of every parent to try to do too much.

Alex: I think it's not just helpful to people who are familiar with autism like you said earlier. I think it's something that has a universal story that touches on accepting yourself for who you are and understanding your kid and your kid understanding you and it's like sort of a journey that everyone can relate to. because we're all...that also sort of touches on that line that Robert De Niro [as Stan] says, "None of it's special," we're all our own unique humans and I think that people often like to put labels on it--and those labels can be helpful a lot of the time—but at the end of the day I think these stories and especially this story really does speak to almost everyone.

Anne: You know, that's where it really moves the needle in terms of representation of autism in film. It doesn't "other" the autistic characters or pathologize autism. It really shows that universality that we've been talking about and in doing that it *removes the stigma* and everyone can feel more comfortable, which is so important.

Tony: Mm-hmm. Yeah, it's really...I hope everyone hears you say that Anne. It's really, really well put. Yeah.

Anne: So, it's about to launch, and what's that going to look like? I mean, it's about to launch in many, many, many theatres in the US.

Tony: Yeah. I keep hearing they're increasing. It started out 500 theatres for sure guaranteed nationwide and then I heard it was somewhere between 500 and 800. I don't know--I don't know where that's going to land. I do know it's going to be at least 500 theatres on May 31st. And we've been on this wonderful tour of film festivals because we were at the Toronto International Film Festival, which is where we made our sale to Bleeker Street, which is a wonderful distribution company and we started, I think, at the Woodstock Film Festival where we won the Audience Award and we just won the top prize at the Boulder International Film Festival, then we won the top prize at Sun Valley International Film Festival.

Bleeker Street is just very organically getting us out to festivals all over the country, just to sort of build the word of mouth, and what we discovered to our satisfaction is we've been getting these awards. Bobby Cannavale won the Best Actor Award at one of the festivals because he is extraordinary in this film, like I have always been a Bob Cannavale fan, but I fell in love with him watching him play Max. I mean really just mind-blowingly wonderful in the part, he just has so much heart. What Bleeker Street has done with Closer Media and Wayfair- Wayfair, those are the two companies that enabled us to make the film. They financed us and are our domestic partners.

When we sold it to Bleeker Street, it was obvious they just wanted to get this in front of audiences because when it played in Toronto, it played for like 3,000 people. It was crazy. It was the biggest theatre I've ever seen in my life. And it got a standing ovation and it was... that was where they kind of came up with the idea, let's put this in front of audiences because when there's a big audience and they're watching this, it's like electric. And, everybody has permission to laugh and then cry. And there's a lot of both. There's a lot of tears and a lot of laughter. It becomes somewhat cathartic and it- and so the word of mouth has been just growing and growing and we're going to have a wonderful screening at ReelAbilities... April 3rd in New York City.

On March 28th Tony Goldwyn and I are going to go back to the Museum of Moving Images in Queens where I was fortunate enough to be on a committee that created an awards festival for autistic filmmakers throughout the world, and it's called [Marvels of Media](#), and I'm so proud to have been invited to help throw in my opinions about certain things-- by Josh Sapin, who is a wonderful advocate for autism and has a son on the spectrum and he

brought me into this Marvels of Media world.

This is the third year that it's happening; Tony Goldwyn and I were there last year and we got to meet up with another great organization in California called Exceptional Minds that does film training for filmmaking lovers who are on the spectrum and they find them jobs in film and television and also gaming communities. And then we met the Marvels, we met the Exceptional Minds person and then the next thing by the end of the next, following week, Exceptional Minds students who are all on the spectrum, ended up doing our credits for *Ezra*. We have a real participation--and that was a program that my son, Dimitri had done in California, so I was really happy that we could engage and employ more crew that were autistic crew people.

Anne: That is great. Yeah.

Tony: Yeah.

Alex: Yeah. We're doing some of the pre-screening events with autistic panelists after the movies in various cities around the country with Bleeker Street and these screenings are going to allow autistic people and their families to come see the film and share it with the whole community, so I'm really excited about that as well.

Tony: Oh, that sounds wonderful.

Anne: That's like a relaxed performances kind of thing?

Alex: Yeah, we're going to make it accessible and be very attuned in making sure that autistic people are able to experience the film in a way that is good and also for people who are wondering what we're doing here in L.A., it is going to sort of focus on autistic people who are working in the media, giving other autistic actors and writers a chance to talk and meet one another and experience this film and sort of create a conversation around it.

Tony: Well, that's great.

Anne: Wow, there's so much going on and coming up for the film. It's wonderful speaking with you Tony Spiridakis, Alex Plank. The film again is *Ezra*. It'll be coming to a theatre near you, so be sure to watch out for it. Thank you again.

Tony: Thank you so much, Anne.

Alex: Thank you so much, Anne. This has been a pleasure.

[Outro music: Jazzy synth pop music]

Anne: You're listening to Noncompliant: a Neurodiversity Podcast. I'm your host Anne Borden King. Noncompliant is recorded at MCS Studios and transcribed by Julie-Ann Lee. This episode was engineered by Lucien Lozon. Thanks to our team and thanks for listening.