

This is a transcription of the Yellow Jack Podcast, Episode 7.

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[Voice over, Robert:] Hi, I'm Robert Ouimet, and this is the Yellow Jack podcast.

[00:00:10] On this podcast, I'm speaking with people who are in self-isolation because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Canada, self-isolation is 14 days. Along with social distancing in the larger population, is meant to slow down the spread of the virus. So anyone who's coming in from outside the country, in some cases traveling between provinces or who may have been in contact with someone who has COVID-19, is being asked to self isolate, to do their part to slow down the spread of the virus.

Rogério Soares is a filmmaker based in Montreal. He was out of the country when COVID-19 broke out.

[Rogério] Two weeks ago and was in Brazil. And I was shooting a film there in the Amazon, basically, and I was pretty isolated from what was going on around the world because it was pretty much like immersed in fishing communities and indigenous people. You know, in very small places. I knew what was going on. But I have the real dimension of what was happening, you know, in Canada and even in Brazil at that moment. I was meant to stay there until the end of April for what was really a long trip like two and a half months. And I started receiving messages from my Canadian friends saying, you have a very narrow window to come back to Canada and Canada's stopping flights from Brazil.

[00:01:35] The prime minister is asking people to return. You better rethink your projects. because you might end up getting stuck in there. I thought people might just be panicking and didn't give much attention to it. But I started kind of, you know, being more connected with what was going on, basically. And then I realized like, wow, this is this is really big and this is really an emergency situation.

[00:02:04] So I basically I had to finish what it was doing, postpone, you know, my production. I had to cancel it, basically.

[00:02:13] And it was a big kind of ordeal to get the tickets back to Canada like in three days time. Yeah.

[00:02:22] So airplanes were full. You know, airfares were like very expensive. There was there were like fear that planes would not fly. You know, quitting on flying, there were like rumors that Canada was going to go into a completely shutdown. And for the first time, I was like, well, I started to get into a panic and I bought two tickets.

[00:02:49 Robert] You did?

[Rogério] Yes. One was a Delta Airlines stop in New York. And I was like, I just hope that I won't have to do it because by then I knew of how New York was going through, you know. And I basically got a second ticket, which was like the literally the last flight from Brazil to Canada. And I was lucky enough to be able to get into that place and come back home, basically.

[00:03:18 Robert] Well, I was going to say you you're a filmmaker. You've you make documentaries and you've been in some pretty hairy situations in your work. So I'm imagining if you were panicking, it was probably pretty crazy.

[00:03:29 Rogério] Yes. Because then suddenly I realized what was going on in Brazil was that I was well, I was born in Brazil. So, you know, I have dual citizenship. And it's like this is part of my culture as well. And I saw all the denial from, Bolsonaro, the Trump of the Tropics. Our president, you know, kind of basically denying, you know, the dangers and denying, you know, the possibility

that Brazil, because of its lack of infrastructure and poverty and vulnerability, could actually get into a disaster zone unseen.

Like when I see the pandemic in the north, you know, in China, in Europe and in North America. These are places we've a lot more infrastructure than the South. So when you think of the Brazilian population, for instance, I can tell you I was kind of working with families in one of them. They had six children. They always slept in the same room because they only had a tiny little house. You have like grandparents living with their grandchildren. You have extended families. Sometimes they have fifteen people living in the same house. The place where I was, which was a city with a hundred thousand inhabitants, they only had six was what's call ICU unit. So sick, you know, emergency kind of facilities for hundred thousand people. And then I was like, well, this is this this is really bad because people have no access to doctors. They have no access to basic sanitation. You know, so the level of misinformation as well. Enough afraid that there is a lot of illiteracy really kind of made me feel very worried about what was going on in the country, in the region. And that obviously had an impact on me as well.

[00:05:28 Robert] Now, do you must still have family in Brazil.

[00:05:31 Rogério] I do. My father, my mother, I'm in Canada alone. I came to Canada 12 years ago.

[00:05:36] But my my my parents are Portuguese immigrants into Brazil and they're there. My dad is 84 and he lived by himself. . But we've like self-isolation. He doesn't believe in that. He's kind of you know, we realizing right now the dangers of it. But there is a kind of a misinformation culture in Brazil perpetuated by the government, which is really telling people to go out, telling the business to open its border, saying that the economy is more important because people will not survive if the economy doesn't thrive. And this is like a demy when it's a completely Bolsonaro's interpretation and lack of empathy, you know, for people. And my father kind of in between, you know, getting worried, but also not much wanting to lose his independency. And, you know, it's been really hard for us to call and explain and to try to deal with this situation a daily basis. What I can do with the presence everyday over the phone..

[00:06:48 Robert] That's all you can do. So, you know, when you got back to. How long have you been in isolation? Just a few days. Right.

[Rogério] Day seven.

[Robert] Okay. You're halfway through your two weeks. You weren't planning to come back to Montreal at this point when you got back to Montreal. What kind of setting are you in there where you were staying?

[00:07:09 Rogério] Okay. Right. I do have an apartment, but in my apartment I share that with a Canadian friends and she lives in New York and in Montreal. She lives in both cities, basically. And right now, she's at home with her boyfriend. And it was really difficult for me to think about going there, being like self isolatorion in a small apartment with two other people who were already escaping New York. And it was like this is probably not a good combination because of the, you know, lack of space that we had in the apartment. It's big enough for us to living there.. So I managed to get in touch with a friend who had an empty apartment and she kindly invited me to be there. And it's been OK. It's been pretty good. But I have no access to the Internet. I don't have my phone. So I needed to. By the time I got here to really kind of reorganize my mind in my space in order to operate in this setting, basically.

[00:08:21 Robert] So you're just in someone's empty apartment with your phone and that's pretty much it?

[00:08:27 Rogério] Yeah. I mean, the apartment has a bed has a couch. You know, it's not empty in that sense. It's empty because it's like there's nobody living here for quite a while. But yes, what I have it's my phone. And it's been quite an interesting experience. It's experience of being by myself. And, you know, I only turn on the phone twice a day. Like in the mornings and then in the evening because I don't have Internet. So I have like my data plan, which I could extend. But I decided to do a kind of exercise of kind of self with training and, you know, economizing on emotions and being more with myself in my mind and being there for people in my family at certain times of the day, not isolating myself from the words, but trying to bring a new experience into my life. You know, as I have to be isolated, basically.

[00:09:20 Robert] Well, that that sounds like in a way that sounds like a very smart reaction to the circumstance because you're looking at it as an exercise now as opposed to a burden.

[00:09:30 Rogério] Oh, yeah, totally. You know, and I'm learning a lot of things. I'm learning that I can eat more of the same without a problem, for instance, because I don't get food delivery every day. So I get food and I have to cook and I have to you know, it's kind of like, you know, you you end up repeating things. And we very much use of going out and eating you know, choosing and picking. And then somebody I was in the situation of having to survive with less. Which was great.

Also, the lack of communication, since I cannot basically interact with people physically. How you observe. And I was there myself in silence in the street. The trees, the buildings, you know. And I try at the same time to think about things that I could changing my life. Taking this unique opportunity in a way what I see. It's like that. We're going through a very, very horrendous situation. We're losing our elders in our venerable people. To me, when we think about losing our elders, it really kind of painful because they are the keepers of our collective memories. You know, collective consciousness. They are the keepers of our cosmologies. These are the people who are good parts from this earth. In these circumstances, and I think it's kind of very upsetting to see the way, you know, our society, basically, it's losing a very valuable part of its population. So spiritually halting. I think it's kind of bugging and kind of it really kind of makes me feel sad that, you know, when we see the pandemics, it's really vulnerable, sick, the poor and the people who probably have less conditional health or a pandemic doesn't choose, you know, but it's like that's that's what we'll be seeing a the world. That makes me think they know about my position in this ward and the things that I want to do with my life, the change that I can make, you know, quite slow.

[00:11:42] But I think they're quite important in terms of maybe they want to travel by planes that much anymore. You know, maybe I want to buy less. So I've been taking my time to think about the ways, like as a person, as a citizen of this planet, that I can cure my kind of my my life and the things that I can do in terms of, you know, opening up windows of dialog and being there for people being present and trying to be a useful member of society. So this is going on, you know, in my mind right now as a as I'm isolated. And they must see that in spite of all the suffering that I've seen the word. This is like this is a fantastic time for me. And I hope for other people to really think, you know, inwards and try to realize that it's like so many things that we can change.

[00:12:35] And this is the first time that, like I said, I think since the industrial revolution, this is the first time that the whole world pause. You know, this is like this is major. We should try to look at this as a kind of a symbol, you know, to help change the patterns in which we have been through not being aware of. So that's that's my main frame right now.

[00:13:01 Robert] Well, you know, that's very inspiring because I think we forget how busy we are in the modern age. We don't stop and think we don't have time leaders, you know, to to meditate, think about these things because we're just so busy and we're so connected. We have the Internet,

we have email, we have social media, we have Netflix. We're just going, going, going. And what you're saying is that this is giving you an opportunity to reflect about it.

But I'm curious, as a filmmaker, obviously, you must also be there must be ideas germinating about film project that has some of those underpinnings. I mean, your work has all the I'm just thinking now about River Silence where, you know, you've done this amazing a beautiful documentary about, you know, the issues with hydroelectric dams in the Amazon. And, you know, you're always, you know, taking us into the point of view of the people who are really stuck with these creations that that have gone ahead. So I'm imagining, though, you're this must be germinating some ideas for a film for you.

[00:13:58 Rogério] It does. In fact, like I work with human rights and I work with social issues. But I'm also a poet. I'm also a writer. So as a me into isolation, I'm actually working. Right now, we have a grant from the Arts Council, Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec. And one of the projects that I hope to do besides the shooting of part of my film was to write the script. So what I've been doing right now and this is really, really interesting that you're pointing out, is that in the seven days that I've been here, I've been really digging into my original project and writing the original script that I have to deliver.

And the entire film is changing. You know, my entire concept of, you know what I want to say. It's changing because of this. Right. So instead of being more of an investigative mind right now, I ended up writing a script that it's poetry and expiratory about people and the cities where they leave. And I've been reading. Margining those spaces, and it's quite interesting because I just had a book in my hands, which is by Italo Calvino the Italian writer - Invisible Cities, where he reinvents city as Marco Polo traveling and describing to the emperor that I don't remember his name like his empire and the cities that he visited and people in all of that. And then suddenly this has been like a sea and they've been transforming, you know, a hill. They have a kind of a harsh look into reality, into a more poetic kind of look into the lives of people in the Amazon. I think it is the necessity of bringing a little a little bit of dream and beauty into the harsh reality. And this is really influencing the way I'm writing it to the point that it's like I do documentaries and I'm almost writing a fiction script, you know.

[00:16:06] So it is it is causing a huge impact on me and on my creative process.

[00:16:10 Robert]. I'm sort of not that surprised, though, because your films have a very poetic look and feel and and pace to them. So, yeah, if you're bringing that into the script now, they find that really interesting and you can't wait to see what's going to come out of that.

[00:16:25 Rogério] Thank you so much. But you're right. I mean, I bring I tried to kind of cuts like, well, I use what we call magic realism. Right. Which is kind of a space within reality that we can breathe and then we can dream. So I created those poetic image, you know, to counterbalance reality.

[00:16:45] But in the documentary, something you have to be more careful when you're doing it, of course, because you don't want to designate like reality from, you know, your own perspective as a filmmaker.

[00:16:55] That's a huge issue for me. And. When I make a film, because I could exaggerate on that. And, you know, it's a process of finding the right equilibrium between that. But right now, especially because I'm writing, I'm really kind of overtakes over. You know, that's rule lens. Oh, I'm mostly interested to find out what's going to be at the end. You know, kind of I'm not sure right now. And I just hope that the Arts Council would be happy with the kind of, you know, influences that I'm having to produce something that it's not quite what I propose.

[00:17:31 Robert] I think that a process it sounds fantastic to me.

And I think that, you know, there's going to be a lot of shifting of perspectives and ideas and projects as we go through this and continue to go through this and figure out what the playing field of our new world is going to be when we come back. And I'm I'm hoping that it will take some of the good and some of the positive things, the kind of things you're talking about into our world when we come back into whatever new new normal is going to be.

[00:18:00 Rogério] Yeah, I agree with you. And I hope that we can go beyond that movement. Right, because the opposite can also happen.

We can bring the best out of ourselves in situations like that. But I also know we are humans. We can also bring the worth of ourselves into that type of situation as well. I mean, we've seen that with Trump. We've seen that we have both tomorrow, you know, like us world leaders or politicians. And that also kind of somehow permeates through our lives, in our communities, in our society. So I think we have to be on guard. We have to be aware of this and really shift our perspective. But also, you know, go inwards, go into our inner self and, you know, kind of take the moment to analyze who we truly are. And, you know, what is what is it what are the chances that we have to maybe do some important shifts? You know, I think that's that's that's the biggest lesson, you know, that I can learn from it in spite of all the real necessities. You know, you need to work on Monday. You need to to keep on living. You know, life is not going to change, basically, you know, like the planet in this structure, the economic structure and capitalism and all of that is still going to be around, you know. But there are things that we can do to soften that and basically rediscover ourselves. Mean, that's my biggest hope.

[00:19:25 Robert] You know, Rogério, so lovely to speak with you. And I'm so excited to hear to see what comes out of your work. What's the first thing you're going to do when you are done your 14 days?

[00:19:40 Rogério] I'm going to go for a walk, because this is the thing that I really miss.

I love nature and I love observing nature and the like. Stuck in an apartment, not being able to go for a walk. It's something that I still struggle with. I have I've accepted it. But this is going to be the first thing I'm going to open the door and it's going to be this incredible feeling of freedom, you know, and virgin aeration as I was. The door and I will be able to breathe like fresh air and feel the cold. You know what? That's gonna be great.

[00:20:18 Robert] Fantastic. All the best to your family. I hope everything's okay with your parents.

[00:20:23 Rogério] Thank you so much. All the best..

[00:20:26 Robert] Are you going to be able to pick up your film where you left off. How hard is it gonna be for you to go back and and and finish what you started?

[00:20:34 Rogério] Well, I have to kind of deal with those issues. But you know what? I think we have to be creative.

You know, I'm gonna try to work. We've got a perfectly. Yeah.

You know, I think we have to change, you know, perspective. We have to change things. Art is about, you know, not only manufacturing things, but those who, you know, remote in. You know, re-creating concepts and ideas. And this is what I've been thinking right now. It's like I could go back into my original project and I could finish it.

But it's like I have the chance of doing something here that is that has shifted in. It's different and it's more simple in a way, but it's more effective for what I'm feeling in the whole my creative process going on right now. So I might end up with, you know, working with much of it that I had and I'll be very happy with that.

[music up then down for]

[Robert] Rogério Soares in Montreal.

For links to COVID-19 resources, links to some of Rogério's films, as well as transcripts of this podcast, please visit the Web site at www.podcasthouse.ca/yellowjack.

And if you or someone you know is in self-isolation and you're happy to share that story, get in touch with me on the website. There's a form that you can fill out and I'll get back to you as quickly as I can.

I'm Robert Ouimet in Vancouver. Thanks for listening.