

2000 Toronto International Film Festival

An interview with David Gordon Green, director of *George Washington*

David Walsh
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George Washington, written and directed by David Gordon, looks at a group of young people, mostly black, in a Southern town, more or less on their own terms. George, a 13-year-old, who has to wear a football helmet because of a head injury; the narrator, Nasia; and the fast-talking Buddy. They come together and separate and come together again. The film takes its time. The dialogue is not composed of everyday conversation, but heightened, manipulated. The filmmaker has not condescended; emotions and thoughts are articulated carefully.

The film is a series of sequences, primarily conversations, often set amidst the rusting detritus of a decaying industrial town (Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in fact). Nothing spectacular takes place, although there is an accidental death that has implications for all the characters. Adults are largely, although not entirely absent. Moral and legal authority is entirely missing. The kids try to make sense of themselves and their relationships.

No one in the film is named George Washington, but it aims to be about things elementally American. At its strongest, it attains a level of patience and seriousness, which appeals strongly; at its weakest it strains to be poetical. In any event, the film would be significant were it only for the traps, fallen into by so many independent works, that it avoids: easy violence, coldness, posturing.

David Gordon Green was present in Toronto and we spoke to him.

David Walsh: I thought your film was unusual. Could you explain something about your own history and how you arrived at making it?

David Gordon Green: I was raised in Texas. In Dallas, Austin and Longview. I spent a lot of time like other kids do. Movies have always been an obsession, I guess, more so than just a leisure activity. When I got out of high school I went to the University of Texas for a little bit, tried to figure how I was going to get into the business. Spent a year there, then went to the North Carolina School of the Arts, where I ended up studying for four years in a brand-new film program they had in a pretty intensive conservatory-type atmosphere. Which was great for me. My intent was avoiding New York and L. A. and

trying to make films at the same time. I made several short films and documentaries. I went down to South America and made a documentary on the art work of elementary school children. Then I did a senior thesis film, called *Physical Pinball* that went to several domestic film festivals. It was the forerunner to *George Washington*.

My inspiration for filmmaking basically begins in 1968 and ends in 1980, beginning with films like *Medium Cool* [Haskell Wexler, 1969] and ending with *Ordinary People* [Robert Redford, 1980]. I could watch the early films of Robert Altman and Terrence Malick all day. Since then and before then acting styles haven't been anything I'm interested in. Subject matter has been far too obvious, on the nose. I feel there was a decade or so in there that had moments that challenged the emotions of the audience and dealt with subject matter. They still used star-power and made big Hollywood films, but used them in a more creative fashion.

I went to Los Angeles for a year, basically figuring the industry out a little bit, working for production companies and studios, on productions, on sets, just doing every job I could. I was very frustrated. I don't like the way it works out there. Everything is contingent on cast and packaging. Everything seems so artificial, and not soulful and not passionate. People would go into multi-million dollar productions that they knew in the end were going to be terrible movies, but had already pre-sold for financial gain in foreign territories, so they were just laughing their way through it all. It was disheartening for me. I loved movies and admired filmmakers who loved movies and put their hearts into the material they were doing. It upset me to the point where I went back home, not home, but back to North Carolina.

I worked at a doorknob factory, I started earning money. I'd made pretty good money in Los Angeles. I kept it all and with a few others, we put all our money together, made *George Washington*, just on what my friends and I had accumulated.

We gave up our day jobs for a 19-day shoot, 24 hours a day, we had two camera units going all the time. We all lived in the same house, cast and crew. It was a kind of nice psychology, in terms of bringing performances out of the kids.

DW: How did you choose them or find them?

DGG: We looked at hundreds of kids, everything from kids who'd been in TV shows and commercials to the kid who lived next door. I was sitting in a barber shop, for example, and started talking to this one girl, who had charisma. You hardly ever see young black kids except in an urban, hip-hop setting. I was trying to get an ethnic diversity of kids and make something that was more meditative, more thoughtful and poetic. So I got kids from teen centers and churches, kids who had a new way of speaking, who had things to say and thoughts to express, who had lived through tragedies and traumas. Kids who were willing to share that with a camera in a comfortable way that was going to be believable and natural. We tried to make a looser narrative that took a different route in creating an atmosphere. Basically it was my reaction to a lot of the films I see today that just really frustrate me. Independent films...

DW: The so-called independent films.

DGG: They're not independent of anything. They're still answering to a hundred different people and they have no precise vision of what they're trying to achieve. It seems to me to be a way to kill time and get a paycheck. They're not working for [Hollywood producer] Jerry Bruckheimer, that's all.

DW: The film seems unusual in that it's personal, it has a poetic quality and it also deals in some way with social life. What I found a pleasant surprise is that it's not obsessed with race.

DGG: It's accurate for kids at that age. A point of the film was my own reaction to the hostilities that come about later in life. I grew up in a predominantly black and Hispanic neighborhood, and never really gave it a whole lot of thought until I went off to high school, and everybody started bringing up the history and the heritage and who had done what to whom, and who deserved this or that based on our forefathers, generations ago that I never knew. I was getting blamed for things, losing friendships for ridiculous reasons. Not only is it a portrait of the way things used to be for me, but a kind of a utopian environment, not only color-blind, but age-blind. Adults dealt with the children in a very mature way, and kids speak to adults in very intelligent ways. A 13-year-old boy and a 26-year-old guy can have a conversation about their love lives, in what I hope is an innocent and charming way.

It was a difficult balance to make a film that felt natural and realistic, but to bring almost a dreamlike quality to the narrative. Obviously a sculpting hand is at work, taking out all the profanity and making sure the kids are digging deep into their vocabulary. It's manipulated. Some people say it's self-indulgent, but to me not enough filmmaking is self-indulgent. Too much of filmmaking is done by committee, too much of every decision is a vote. Whereas here it's just me and people I trust. There's too little trust in the film industry, which is probably for a good reason. I'm probably naive to say that.

DW: It's difficult to make this sort of film today. When you

have a \$100-million budget, it's objectively difficult to make a personal, deeply-felt and passionate film. There's so much at stake.

DGG: There's so much at stake. And I think at a certain level creativity is achieved through a lack of resources. "We can't afford a crane shot, how can we make this an interesting composition? How can we make it look professional, like it cost more than a quarter?" We wanted it to be an alternative to a lot of the low-budget films. We didn't want to go the DV [Digital Video] route, because that's not a look that appealed to any of us. Economically it doesn't make sense. There's a misconception that it's cheaper and it's not.

DW: You speak about the responses you've had to films you admire, would you like audiences to respond to your film in the same manner?

DGG: Yes, ideally it's a film I designed so that you could take a long walk afterward and think about what you've seen, and it would feel like a dream. One of those dreams that make perfect sense when you're dreaming, but you wake up and try to explain it to a friend and you can't quite figure out the order of things, but you know the mood you're in. I wanted it to have that quality, of complicated emotions. So that you're not quite sure if you're supposed to laugh or cry at various points. To have that challenging emotional aspect which I find so rewarding in films. Helping me discover something in myself as an audience member is what I'm most thrilled by. Taking an hour or more after a film and not feel like talking to anybody, but just thinking about what I've been living through the last hour and a half or two hours. We wanted to present a new world, a new environment and a new tone so that people could have something to reflect on.

DW: Why is it so rare to find a serious attitude toward people's lives in American films?

DGG: That's a good question. ... I think the heads of the studios and the people who are writing the films just aren't reaching for that. That's what depressed me about the industry out there, they're reaching for the smart package. It's not smart to take emotional risks. Our situation was different: "It's our own money, what have we got to lose?" I don't really know why it's so rare. The industry is kind of a baffling thing to me.



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