

Buenos Aires 6th International Festival of Independent Cinema

Interview with Clark Lee Walker, director of *Levelland*

David Walsh
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DW: It's a film that gives a glimpse of what life in the US is really like.

CLW: It's somewhat natural for a first-time director to pick a coming of age story because any kind of low-budget endeavor is going to be a means of turning liabilities into assets. Filming with young actors, none of them that experienced, is an opportunity to mold a personality and make interesting casting discoveries.

Having seen enough of the genre, I wanted to make a film that actually reflected what teenage life is like, because your friends don't all die in a fiery crash on graduation night every time or blow up the high school. The fate of kids who don't shoot up their high school or kill themselves might be just as tragic. They've just been benumbed by the Wal-Martization of life.

DW: It's not teenage life in general, there are moments that tell you this is life under particular conditions. The mother's economic insecurity, for example, puts things in focus.

CLW: They actually talk about it very little. They mention that they live in a company town ...

DW: Where did you grow up?

CLW: I grew up all over. My father was actually a crop-duster. We moved from Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Texas. And my mother was a bookkeeper, first in cattle-auction houses and eventually she got a job, after my parents divorced, for an oil company. I lived in a big company town. We compared it to living in a Gulag pumping station. It was a one-company town. When there was hostile takeover bid, the town held prayer meetings for their corporation. That was the closest I've come to living under a totalitarian system. It was very frightening.

DW: The film has a sympathetic view of nearly

everyone.

CLW: I think for better or worse that's one thing I inherited from my association with Richard Linklater, is an overriding affection for my characters. If you don't love the people you're making a movie about, you know, it's no fun to work with them, it's no fun to develop the story.

DW: Were these non-professionals?

CLW: We wanted to cast real skateboarders, because one of the things that's really difficult to fake is their general outlook on life, it's something that pervades the way they walk, talk, speak and see the world. To that extent we did a large casting search in and around Austin [Texas]. We didn't have the money to bring in actors from the West Coast and I didn't necessarily want to do that anyway. I think you find interesting, outgoing people who are willing to play themselves on camera somewhat if you can match the personality to the part.

DW: Why are glimpses of life so rare? You see so many films and you wonder, 'Who are these people?' They're not people I recognize or the people sitting next to me recognize. People say, 'Oh, it's money.' But that's not all. Because there are also independent, low-budget filmmakers who have nothing to say. I do think it's a question of perspective and whether you take a critical attitude toward the life you lead and the world you live in, and whether your work is purposeful.

CLW: It's very strange that there are almost no films about class in America. Why is there a business section in every newspaper, but not a labor section? I've never figured that out either. By virtue of growing up extremely poor, I was aware of class from an early age, I guess. My grandfather was a working cowboy. In

north Texas and south Arkansas during the Depression. His first job for wages was working for a Roosevelt program where they destroyed cattle to bring the market back up, so he got a strange view of government. He was a maverick all his life.

I watched my grandfather when I was growing up. I couldn't think of a single person who knew more about cows, horses, grass or whatnot, I watched him slowly be starved out of existence by the changing markets. He pushed his own son not to go into that business. My father ended up being a pilot, a crop-duster. Oddly enough, he ended up flying for the CIA in Mexico, in a heroin poppy eradication program in the early 1980s. He died doing a pointless job in the "war on drugs" in a plane crash.

So I've always been aware of the politics of what was happening to the people in the small town I grew up in, in Arkansas. There was one large pulp wood factory where everyone ended up working and getting leukemia from working there. It's painfully obvious when you step back to see the economics of small-town America. It's very real when all your friends have to drive two hours to their factory jobs because production is no longer put in the town where people live. Everyone who is trying to save their family farm has to have a second job at the factory, and they're driving back and forth all the time.

Keeping your eyes open makes you aware of class in America, I guess.

In the town where I grew up I now know more people in the cemetery than I do living, because the young people have to leave. It's frightening. We have a haunted center of America.

DW: To get back to the other issue, why is it so difficult to sustain an artistic seriousness?

CLW: There are powerful market forces that act on making every film more like all the others. It's the same homogenization you see going on economically, socially, artistically, structurally all over America. I'm from Texas and I talk like Ted Koppel.

DW: Not to belabor the issue, the question is: why is it so difficult today to resist those pressures? Those pressures have to a certain extent always existed and will always exist in this social order, until it's changed. Most directors at this point don't see a reason to resist—why not become Julia Roberts's favorite filmmaker?

CLW: I try to look at my relation to film as less having to do with the contemporary situation as having to do with the history of film. If I had to write down my top 10 favorite films, half of them would be silent movies. Most of my favorite directors grew up in earlier time or a different time in America, and I think one of the reasons that I like films by Josef von Sternberg or Howard Hawks or Raoul Walsh is that they grew up in a time when the lines between rich and poor were more clearly delineated and people weren't afraid to talk about it. A lot of them had been to a war, had been through a Depression.

Directors working today start off doing something interesting and seem to get homogenized. Part of it is the need to move to Los Angeles. Part of it is the economic model, how everything is corporatized and corrupted at this point. In my life I've witnessed the emergence and evolution of "indie" [independent] film to the point where it's become Disney film.



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