

An interview with Jennifer Venditti, director of *Billy the Kid*

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Jennifer Venditti, the director of Billy the Kid (See review Billy the Kid: "Can you see inside me?"), is a longtime casting agent, who established her New York-based agency in 1998. She has specialized in "street scouting" all over the world for the advertising, fashion and film industries. Venditti has discovered people for such photographers and filmmakers as Richard Avedon, Bruce Weber and Spike Jonze.

The WSWS spoke recently by telephone with Venditti.

Joanne Laurier: Could you explain for our readers how you came upon Billy, and perhaps more importantly, what it was about your own background and interests that impelled you to make a film about him?

Jennifer Venditti: I was casting another film and we were filming on location at his school in Maine, and I always like to incorporate non-professionals with professionals. We had brought all the actors from New York, and I decided to cast non-professionals as extras.

So I would sit everyday in the school lunchroom looking for talent. And I started noticing how everyone sat with the same people every day, and I asked why that was. I was told there was a time when they did invite other people, and it didn't go so well, and I asked why, and they pointed to Billy.

I became interested in making a film about him because I thought he had an incredible "voice" and I thought it should be heard. I wanted to get to know someone through the way the world looks to him and how he experiences the world.

JL: In the interview included on the DVD you speak about an interest in humanity and a compassion for humanity. Are those important qualities in the kind of art and artist that interests you?

JV: To me, we live in a time of such excess on so many levels. If you're going to put something into the collective consciousness, you should be adding something that allows people to look at things differently or look at themselves. To think about the world differently or humanity differently. Something that's going to evoke some type of reflection and cause people to think.

To me, art is a mirror in which to see ourselves and the

world. Good music, good photography, good film, good literature, all force you to look at yourself differently or think about things and reflect on them.

I don't know if all artists do it consciously; some do—others are connected on a different level and do it unconsciously. And then there are those who do art for their egos, and their work doesn't have that impact. Although of course there's always ego involved. But you know the difference between something you do for your ego and a project that you just can't *not* do. You don't care if anyone sees it, or you don't get paid, or you don't get recognition—you just have to do it. And, hopefully, when you do it for the good reasons, you do get recognition, you do get paid and it vibrates. Usually these types of projects have a resonance.

If this work were reaching everyone, then that would indicate a huge collective shift. I'm not naïve enough to think that that's going to happen. You hope that slowly those numbers can increase.

The thing that's interesting is that Billy himself wants to see the big commercial films with superheroes, etc. His life is not perfect like the people in those films, but he has this really beautiful way of looking at the world. This optimistic way, and the film sums it up. The way he says, "Life is a pain in the butt, but it's worth it." You get good things out of a life that's difficult. To me, that's the epitome of what I want from film too. I want to have to think, I want to have to feel. There are gifts within that difficulty. And there's pain that comes with that. And to me, that's what reality is.

JL: Whether you intended or it not, it's difficult not to interpret the movie as a criticism about both the kinds of people "who count" in America at present and specifically those "who count" in American films? How conscious are you of that criticism?

JV: Sometimes people say: "Why am I watching this, nothing's happening?" What do you mean, nothing is happening? Life is happening. For me, the basis of the film is to show exactly that.

What's of greater importance than the act of trying to make your way in the world, as Billy is doing? But we've been

conditioned to feel that's boring because we have so much else going on and so many distractions.

JL: There's more drama in that small-town restaurant than in 10 Hollywood blockbusters put together.

JV: I know! Subtleties are so much more powerful emotionally and in terms of information than spoon-feeding someone and having really obvious moments. When art is subtle, it continually builds and stays with you. You're not sure what it means, and you have to think. People are conditioned to receive information in a different way, so they're not paying enough attention, in my opinion, to rich, important moments.

JL: From the interview, I gather that documentary filmmaker Albert Maysles is someone you admire. He is quoted somewhere as saying, "The natural disposition of the camera is to seek out reality." But, in fact, it's very rare that this happens in contemporary filmmaking. Why do you think that is?

JV: As much as I love real stories, I sometimes have a problem with the way documentaries are put together in the force-fed, informational way. I respond a little bit more to people like [Abbas] Kiarostami and [John] Cassavetes. I feel that the documentary world has gotten a little close-minded. There are these rules about what a documentary is supposed to be, and you ask yourself—"What happened to filmmaking and telling a story?" The camera always has a point of view. I get frustrated when everything is laid out in advance.

JL: Yes, it's not about documentary *or* fiction, it's about life and reality.

JV: I want to be an artist and a filmmaker, whether real life and real characters inspire me or whether I take them and adjust them in some way. It's about the story and how you bring that to the world, however you choose to do that. Because *Billy the Kid* didn't fit the template for a documentary, some people complained, "Well, why am I watching this?" In a fiction film, you don't have to know that this kid has Asperger syndrome.

JL: Often today, the view is that there is no such thing as objective reality—it's all "my narrative" and "your narrative." I think the lives of the majority will begin to take precedence in cinema over the lives of those who have been the focus of cinema.

JV: I hope that the distributors don't get scared. There's so much talk, especially in the documentary community, that this is not what the film industry is looking for. This year at the festivals, a lot less films were picked up. Maybe with people looking at things in a new way, that will shift. I know I watch many things online now. There are videos that people make themselves that get millions of hits. This technology may be the savior for true independent film—not like *Juno* and others that they call independent.

JL: Leaving aside Billy's unusual medical or physiological condition, for us, as spectators, he is unusual because he allows us relatively direct access to his own thoughts and feelings, and beyond that, to a bit of the inner life of this small town. Billy is not the only extraordinary character we meet. There is his mother, there is Heather, her brother and there are glimpses of other personalities. In that sense, the film, for me, becomes less about the "specialness of Billy" and more about the "specialness of life," especially, as I've already suggested, about life that is not generally of interest to the film industry at present. Would you object to such an interpretation?

JV: For me, it's always about the idea that there is beauty all around us. That each person has something beautiful to share or to teach us or to have us experience. Perhaps because of the way we're conditioned, or how we're brought up, we miss out on a lot of opportunities for human interaction.

Two things I'm really interested in: first, opening up people to the fact that you can have incredible moments with someone on a bus or in a park. There are wonderful stories and extraordinary people everywhere. And the other is flipping preconceived ideas of how we see people. I think the perfect illustration of this is when Billy and his mom are having the conversation about Van Gogh and Gauguin.

People would not expect this from a 15-year-old kid living in a trailer in a small town wearing heavy-metal T-shirts and sweats. He finds the poetry in everything, in films like *The Terminator*. (He says "I want to rescue a damsel in distress. There's always the future. The future is not written, it's what we make for ourselves.") He extracts the beauty in everything.

He finds a profound insight in everything he's reading or listening to. Part of this is because of his chemical makeup, but the beauty of it is that he does not know how to do some of the things that hurt us, whether it's lying and so forth. It hurts us and protects us in a way because the world has been set up that way.



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