"Emotional truth and social truth are what I'm interested in"

An interview with Bryan Wizemann, director of Think of Me

David Walsh
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David Walsh spoke to Bryan Wizemann, the director of Think of Me, *during last month's Toronto international film festival.*

David Walsh: This is an unusual and in many ways a remarkable film. To get a film made on this subject in America today must take a certain amount of determination.

Bryan Wizemann: I've always known that I was a little outside the mainstream in terms of both subject matter and how it's treated. There's a constant tension in this film, and it's an unflattering portrait, so it was not the easiest film to get financed. It took five years basically to get it off the ground, and that's with the script having won a national award in screenwriting.

DW: Is it because those with the money think that it won't sell, that it won't make people happy, that it doesn't make the people with the finances happy … ?

BW: I think this is a common industry view in the US, that people go to films just to be happy, that they go to buy popcorn, as an escape, and I think the market in a down economy makes safe bets by making very big bets, and they go, 'Oh, we spent $300 million on a robot, that's based on a video game, that's based on' … whatever, and so a film that is inspired by a different type of filmmaking, that tackles an under-represented type of character, the studios and such just don't know what to make of it. So we had to fund it independently.

DW: They think you come from Mars.

BW: Exactly. And even after such films have been successful, films such as *Frozen River*, *Half Nelson*, *Winter's Bone*, even when such films have shown that there's a thirst for well-done, well-crafted, artful, independent, dramatic films, which are often difficult films … Even when such films make 30 times their budget, people are still gun-shy about traditionally financing those projects.

DW: It's a big difficulty, because much of what you see is rubbish partly as a result.

BW: I'm hoping that as things become more democratized with Netflix, Video on Demand, web sites like that, there will be less spoon feeding of the population. I think as more and more outlets open up, and more and more streaming happens, things will change. The longer people stay on Netflix apparently, the more their tastes start to go to more *auteur*-driven films and away from the huge, studio productions. So for people like me, I hope that's true.

DW: I think that depends as well, although this is a separate discussion, on what happens politically and socially too.

BW: Absolutely.

DW: Because this isn't going to go on forever, what's going on in the US. There are going to be social explosions. The situation is just impossible for so many people.

I gather there is a certain personal or autobiographical element in the film, directly or indirectly.

BW: A bit of both. I truly did not set out to do something autobiographical. I really set out to do a fiction. Only after I wrote it, did I realize how much my own life had been peppered in. I grew up in Las Vegas with a single mother, and we weren't as poor as the lead character in the film, but money was always tight. There are a lot of details that I was able to consciously or subconsciously tuck in to some of the corners of the script. I'd say that in half the film I could point to something corresponding in my life.

DW: One of the problems with a great many filmmakers you speak to is that they haven't had much of a life, not a life with any serious difficulty, in any case. You see the results in the blandness, mediocrity.

BW: Unfortunately, I think you're right in the sense that I know, in this economy, a fair number of independent filmmakers are able to work right now because they have money, they're funded. Or they are supported by their parents, or whatever. And you're right, they tend to do work that's just some random thing they pull out of the air, it hasn't really been lived, or experienced, and you get what is often criticized as navel-gazing. It's just this post-college malaise, and not much else.

That's not the kind of film I make, and I'm definitely not funded. Who knows, maybe there's room for all those kinds of films.

DW: I'm sure that's the case, but I would hope this is more representative of what is to come. I'm sure it's frustrating and difficult, but you know as well as I do that the films that endure, that people watch years from now, are the ones that are difficult to make, and don't always find a mass audience to begin with.

BW: I think that one of the highest compliments that I could receive is if this is watched years down the road, or continues to be watched, and isn't forgotten like so many films. We'll see.

The films that influenced me are often the older classic films, such as those by Truffaut, Kurosawa, Bergman and all those. I didn't discover these films till much later, and you discover them because they endure. The Dardenne brothers' films more recently.

DW: The conditions Angela [Lauren Ambrose] lives in are lived in by tens of millions of people, one way or another. People hanging on by their fingernails.

BW: Forty or so million in the US by the last official count, which is inexcusable. Depending on your political views.

DW: Some people are doing very well.

BW: That's true.

DW: You mention the Dardenne brothers. *Think of Me* does make *L'Enfant* [*The Child*] come to mind, although I think this is a better film. Their films now, in my opinion, tend to end up pointing the finger at the poor, blaming the poor for their bad choices and passing on, perhaps unintentionally, the official mantra about 'personal or individual responsibility.' Obviously, if Angela in your film had 'sold' her child, it would be god-awful and she would bear the responsibility. But the conditions under which she faces that choice are not of her making.

BW: When I was a kid, when my father left, and we had nothing and for years we struggled by, I would often say to myself, 'Why doesn't somebody help us? Why doesn't somebody just help us? This is unreal.' And I think I've carried that throughout my life and it's affected my belief system, it's affected my own philosophy.

DW: I was pleased it ended as it did.

BW: I couldn't imagine ending it any other way. It would have been crushing. It is redemptive. Although nothing has changed with their situation; financially, nothing's changed, she's out of a job. She's come full circle. She's come through this growth. But they're no better off.

DW: It has an appealing look.

BW: With Mark Schwartzbard, the cinematographer, a close friend, we worked out a distinct approach, this restrained hand-held approach, this sensitive observation, there's no point of view, no cutaways, it's very … the film is very dry in a sense. There's no fluff, I hope, no ornamentation, it's a very stark, observational aesthetic.

DW: It remains dramatic. It's the drama of everyday life. My complaint often is that you could walk out of most movies and go to the local diner or bar and find more drama eavesdropping on conversations than you do in the movie you've just seen.

BW: I agree with that. That's something I've always been interested in. The first cut of this film was four hours long. I'm really interested in sustained observation and the drama of the everyday, the mundane. We had to trim a little bit out, to be somewhat receptive to normal audiences who can't sit through several hours.

I'd like to make contact with a bigger audience. I have no preconceived notions about keeping this in some rarified air. It was written to be very approachable, it's not a pretentious piece.

DW: I found it sympathetic to people, in a number of ways. There's the moment when Angela says to the black kid, 'You're a nice kid, don't involve yourself in this.' She doesn't want to get him in trouble. And the scene in the store with the Hispanic clerk. First, Angela yells at her for not speaking English, then she apologizes. That's rare. Generally, if someone's poor and in difficult circumstances in a film, then he or she is just a brute. But people are not like that. They're all over the place. Some of the poorest and most desperate people can do some of the most generous things. They can also do some of the most horrible things.

BW: When you're writing dialogue, you get to play amateur psychologist, and when Angela curses that woman out at the store, that is displaced aggression. She is wrestling with this idea about her kid that was just tossed at her, and she's even failing at getting the kid some sneakers, which is ever-present in the film, which she still hasn't done. She's feeling desperate, and she just loses it on this woman.

A lot of audience members hate it when Max [Dylan Baker] comes back to her in the car and offers to call somebody. It's this nice gesture, when her car won't start. Because they want him to be either bad or good. But he's just apathetic, and amoral, but that doesn't make him a serial killer.

DW: Those moments resonate because they happen to be truthful.

BW: I think emotional truth and social truth are something I am always going to aspire to. It's what I'm interested in.

DW: So many things you see are not based on life, they're made to impress, based on other films that have impressed the person who's making them.

BW: That's true. One of the most frustrating feelings my wife and I experience is when we rent something, and an hour later, we'll ask, did we watch a movie? We cannot remember it. It was just completely devoid of any content or interest. I'm always trying to reach out to life.

DW: What films were an influence?

BW: In regard to this film in particular, Erick Zonca's *The Dreamlife of Angels* was an influence. Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher*. The early Dardenne brothers movies. I like Mike Leigh, Ken Loach, John Cassavetes. I've been compared to Ken Loach before, and it made me delve deeper into his work. Also, the traditional European heavy-hitters, like Tarkovsky, Bergman, Kurosawa. The monsters.

Loach, Leigh and the others are interested in emotional truth as well. There are so many. *Ballad of a Soldier*, the Soviet film.

DW: *Think of Me* a quiet, honest, intense, dramatic film. That's high praise.

BW: A good deal of sacrifice went into it. I'm best known as a filmmaker for a little short I have online, which is just a fight with my wife for ten minutes about how furious she is about all this money that I've wasted in film for years and years. You know, and there's having a kid and everything. Holding out to make something you believe in, rather than something you don't, has required a lot.

DW: Tell her for us that it was worth it.

BW: She's enjoying this, she's happy to be in Toronto.