

An interview with writer Nick Flynn: “The job of an artist is to look at the realities of existence”

Being Flynn with Robert De Niro based on Flynn's memoir

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On March 23 the WSWS favorably reviewed *Being Flynn*, with Robert De Niro, Paul Dano and Julianne Moore, written and directed by Paul Weitz. The screenplay was based on a 2005 memoir by Nick Flynn. The book chronicles Flynn's life growing up in suburban Massachusetts in the 1970s and his job at a homeless shelter in Boston in the 1980s, as well as his relationship with his complicated, difficult father, Jonathan.

Flynn is a poet and the author of several volumes of memoirs, including the award-winning work, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, which formed the basis for the recent film and which has been translated into 14 languages.

In 2007 Flynn traveled to Istanbul to hear accounts of torture from former Abu Ghraib prisoners, victims of the US invasion and occupation. The experience is discussed in his memoir, *The Ticking is the Bomb* (2010).

His poems and other writings have appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Paris Review*, *National Public Radio's "This American Life"* and the *New York Times Book Review*. His web site notes “A professor in the creative writing program at the University of Houston, where he teaches each spring, [Flynn] then spends the rest of the year in (or near) Brooklyn.”

Joanne Laurier spoke to Flynn recently by telephone. In the conversation, he was direct and honest and intense, and extremely articulate.

Flynn began the conversation, as the reader will see, by asking what Laurier had meant in her review when she referred to a number of recent films—including *Being Flynn*—that treat social conditions as still “tentative, somewhat cautious and not necessarily earthshaking.” In the review, Laurier continued that in this group of films “social breakdown is present, but other components of a personal character are still given equal or even greater weight. There is continuing nervousness about being labeled a ‘social realist’ filmmaker.” The discussion on this issue went on for some minutes.

Nick Flynn: In today's films there is a reluctance to bring up the issue of class. That's why I was a little confused when you stated in your review that the film perhaps did not go far enough.

Joanne Laurier: In the film's production notes, Paul Weitz, the director, mentions that you provided an education about the homeless to both cast and crew.

NF: I also was educated by them. Because getting a film made is at least as ugly as the class system. It is difficult to move a project forward that has a deeper reality through forces that are owned by these mega-

conglomerates. So I'm curious to know what you think in the film is tentative, not quite going there, because I think the film does go there.

JL: I want to reiterate that I liked the film a great deal, but there still may be something of a split, a conflict between the social context and the personal narrative. There have not been films about such social subjects for decades, and the filmmakers are only beginning to feel their way.

NF: Only a relatively few people have seen our film. In reality, you won't get people to flock to a film about homelessness unless there is a personal story. Even the studios wanted Jonathan [Flynn's father] to be much nicer, a much more palatable character. I also think it's the great success of the film because he isn't like other characters, say, for example, in *The Soloist* [2009], where the idea is that it's a mistake that the central character's on the streets because he's a genius and doesn't deserve that fate.

JL: Clearly in *Being Flynn*, social conditions do work through the characters in a way that is unusual in current cinema, which overall has difficulty in treating social ills. Filmmakers today do not have the same facility and familiarity that was evident in films of, for example, the 1930s and 1940s, or even the 1970s. I do want to say that both Paul and his brother Chris Weitz are doing some interesting work.

NF: Chris' last movie, *A Better Life* [2011], is an important work. In *Being Flynn*, the story comes from my memoirs of my experiences. But it has been transformed by the sensibilities of the director and the actors. It is a distillation of the experience in which the final product is a collaborative effort.

I find it interesting that both the WSWS and the *New York Times* said the film was tentative, although perhaps for different reasons. I'm still having trouble with this.

JL: As a general rule, filmmakers have difficulty rendering social life head-on. And this is not encouraged by the mainstream film critics.

NF: I do want to explain that Paul really went out on a limb with the studio and this has not paid off. Unfortunately, there are the financial considerations and right now, it has not even come close to paying for itself. If films like *Being Flynn* would generate a bigger audience, then they might not be so rare. That's the reality. It's a big risk to make such a film. In the same opening weekend, *The Lorax* makes \$200 million and *Being Flynn* makes \$50,000—that is the message that Hollywood gets.

I saw how this whole process works. The first script Paul Weitz wrote was a dark, edgy, and gritty script. It did not compromise and dealt with the reality of the situation. For three years, the studios kept telling us they wanted us to soften it, so by the end, it was barely a story about a

homeless shelter. The script was completely unreadable. I would just wince with each page.

When Robert De Niro signed up, he had read the book first. He called me in and said he loved the book, but the script sucked. I told him there was an earlier script and we went back to the energy of the first script. The whole project was close to tanking. The irony is that it might have done better at the box office with the watered-down script.

This is a different problem from a script being too didactic. Originally, I had to drain my prescriptive elements out of the book. But I really felt that to get people to read a book about homelessness, which is a social failing, you have to do it through an individual story. Perhaps that's what you're reacting to when you feel a certain tentativeness in the movie. But I believe that when you confront people with an actual story, as opposed to a category like "the homeless," then you stand a chance at influencing a transformation. How do you get people to engage with a particular social issue is the question.

JL: This is a big artistic question.

NL: There are many considerations. Even the cinematography, the look of a film, will cause people to stay with it to the end. The music. The syntax of a book. Creating a work of art is not the same as a social statement. It operates on a different level.

JL: Tell me how your memoirs became a Hollywood film.

NL: I did a few book tours in 2004 when there was more money to do that. It would be less likely these days. My agent had contacted an agent in Los Angeles who is involved in film. There I met a group of people, one of whom was producer Michael Costigan, who decided to take on the project. He had produced other book-to-film adaptations such as *Brokeback Mountain* [2005] and *The Ice Storm* [1997].

Relatively early, Michael thought that Paul Weitz would be a good fit. He has a dark humor side, which is appropriate for rendering a homeless shelter, which is itself absurd. You could make a musical out of it. I've been at various screenings with homeless people and they get the black humor, the absurdity of the shelter world.

When Paul and I started talking, we realized we came from very different backgrounds. He had grown up in Hollywood royalty. He had never been in a shelter before. Even our terms were different. We worked on the film together for seven years and came to educate each other.

After we had worked on the screenplay, it took another three or four years to get the film made, even after we had De Niro. Even with De Niro and Paul Weitz, it seemed very unlikely that the film would ever get made. I feel really lucky. James Schamus of Focus Features did not shy away from the darker elements of it. He believed in the project, even though he knew in his heart of hearts that people would not flock to this film.

Paul was great. He went to the homeless shelter more than once, met my father more than once, put himself in dangerous situations to understand this world. My main job on the set—I was on the set every day for the whole shoot—was to get the portrayal of the homeless in the shelter and on the street right.

JL: It's our impression that more and more directors, writers and actors are aware of the hardships of the population.

NF: The book and the film are very grounded in this social reality. This creates a dissonance. What percentage of people have been in a shelter? I can't think of a film that has spent so much time with the intricacies of a shelter. Or showing someone cleaning up in a public bathroom or standing in line to get work.

And within that, you also have the individual story of the son trying to understand the father. The idea of what it is to become an artist. And if all people can see is the father-son story, I'm fine with that. It's not my job to force them to see the bigger picture. I feel my biggest contribution to the film was to make sure that the homeless are not stereotyped.

JL: Talk a little, if you would, about debunking some of the myths about

homelessness.

NF: The homeless are less and less the marginalized of society. I say this, having worked in a shelter in 1984, the moment when homelessness was created in this country as we now understand it. Ten years earlier, people would not have walked past a man sleeping on the street. It would have been the cause for great soul-searching as a culture.

By 1984, in part because of the political climate, the years of Reagan and trickle-down theory and "pull yourself up by your bootstraps," the stereotype was created of the poor who somehow deserved their conditions, because of their supposed lack of initiative. These myths then allowed society to accept the unacceptable, masses of people living on our streets.

In that sense, the programs that simply wanted to get rid of the visible signs of homelessness—like in New York City—are strange. Get them off the streets and ship them away. I was very disturbed by programs that would deal with the visibly homeless and not the eighty percent who were going to work every day at minimum wage jobs.

As we see in the film, when my father lost his cab, he was evicted and there was nowhere else to go but a shelter. There was no other option. I think initially he believed he'd only be there for a week or two. He was there for five years. He got mired in the system.

Shelters are like prison; they get funded by tax dollars. This is considered by HUD [the US Department of Housing and Urban Development] to be housing. This is not a cheap option. It's a punitive option.

JL: What do you think is the connection between life and art?

NF: I don't make much distinction between them. I have chosen to put myself in relation to people who are struggling. Working with kids in inner-city public schools, working with the homeless... In my classrooms, many students are homeless.

It seems to me that the job of an artist is to look at the realities of existence, whether they are social realities or psychic realities, economic realities. To look at them deeply and to go into places that have not been examined yet, or difficult to talk about, or confusing, or unsettling. To go into those and bring back an exploration that you can reveal to everyone else that is hard for them to articulate or to access. I don't know what else the job description is for an artist.

JL: Could you speak about the 2007 "Abu Ghraib Detainee Interview Project" that you were involved in?

NF: In the spring of 2004 when the Abu Ghraib photos came out, I became very disturbed by those who defended the torture of Muslims. So I began to immerse myself in writing about Abu Ghraib. The testimonies in the "Interview Project" concentrated on the moments of horror, so they were very difficult. We flew the people from Iraq to Istanbul because it was a safer place to be. We spent 10 days gathering testimony. But then we would spend time with the former prisoners and learn about their lives and their hopes. Rather than the stereotype of a religious fundamentalist or someone moving towards fundamentalism, they were all very complex human beings.

JL: In an interview you say: "When I started looking into why these [Abu Ghraib] images snagged so deeply in my subconscious, I followed those threads back, and they led back to stuff I had touched on in the first memoir—my father's time in prison, my mother's suicide—but they went more deeply into them. In my father's case, he had been tortured in federal prison; he'd been experimented on. And he would tell this story quite often. He was sleep-deprived, had been put in isolation and sexually humiliated. And as I was writing the book, I started realizing that these were the things that also were talked about at Abu Ghraib.

"One of the books I read was by historian Alfred McCoy [*A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror*]. It details the CIA's involvement in developing the torture techniques we saw at Abu Ghraib. They had a 50-year program to develop those

techniques. McCoy talks about how the federal prisons had been the site of early experimentation of these torture techniques. And some of those prisons were prisons that my father was in. So his stories suddenly took on this other resonance.”

NF: There is a connection between what’s happened in Iraq and what happens here. The US incarcerates more of its population than just about anywhere. McCoy and others allege that the prisons are the centers for experiments in social control.

JL: What do you think about the 2012 elections?

NF: I worked really hard to get Barack Obama elected. But I’ve been disillusioned by what he did with the financial crisis, with his stance on torture. So now I’m not working to get him elected. I’ll probably end up voting for him, because it’s basically all we have.

The Occupied movement is the thing that excites me the most. I spent a lot of time with them and part of the movement is demonstrating tomorrow in Houston against a ban on feeding the homeless they want to enact. So some of the most amazing moments I’ve had in the last number of years have been with the Occupied movement.



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