

# director q+a

*with Nicholas White*

## *1.) How and why did you decide to become a filmmaker?*

It's a decision that came on gradually. I was in my first professional performance when I was nine years old and I have been active in the performing arts ever since. But first I was an actor. It wasn't until I got to college that I decided to become a director. It's just something I've always done. It wasn't something I really ever planned to do until my last year or two of college. Then I sort of realized that here was this thing that had been a more consistent interest in my life than anything else and I figured that maybe I should really be doing that.

Plus, I've always been excited by ideas. All my life I've just wanted to understand. I was totally that kid that was driving his parents nuts asking why? And the creative process is the perfect thing for that type of person. John Gardner says that writing is a type of thought. Another great writer, I can't remember who, said, "I write to find out what I think." The creative process allows you to experiment with life itself, as you perceive it, and therefore it enables you to make astounding discoveries about yourself and the world around you.

## *2.) Was it a difficult decision? Was it an easy one?*

It was actually fairly difficult. My whole life, well, ever since I was nine, my parents told me, this is a good hobby, but don't even think about becoming an actor. They did this with the best intentions—they knew how hard it is to make it in the entertainment business and they didn't want me to set myself up for a disappointment. It's because of that that I took so long to even consider doing it. For a long time, it wasn't an option, it wasn't even on the horizon. So it was tough because I was making this choice without any encouragement from my family—well, I did get some from my Mom, because she thinks everything I do is great. Also this decision is always tough, it's a choice to go out there and do something that's very difficult with no support, even if your family thinks you're the next David Lean, there's no system out there for getting into the business, there's a lot of hurdles and not a lot of people and institutions that really care that you want to make movies. It's like being a trapeze artist without a net.

## *3.) Tell me a little bit about your background and schooling.*

I went to Haverford College, which didn't have a theater department. I saw that as a benefit when I applied because I'd decided I wasn't going to do much theater because I needed to focus on real things. Then I ended up doing tons of student stuff and stuff at Bryn Mawr, our sister school. It turned out, though, that not having a theater department was a great thing. I mean, when Josh and I decided to start our own theater company there really wasn't anyone there to help us, there wasn't even a stage. We turned a meeting hall into a theater using eleven lighting trees, black curtain, and a lot of gaffer's tape. It was hard, but it was great. We didn't have any help, but we also didn't have to ask anyone's permission, and we didn't have to answer to anyone; we could do whatever we wanted. It was great training for the real world.

## *4.) Who and what are the greatest influences on your work thus far?*

Gosh, there are so many people and things. I mean Kubrick is probably number one. My Mother loves thrillers. Her favorite movie is Silence of the Lambs. She's a sick woman. So every year we would go skiing after Christmas. So we'd always be up in the mountains in an isolated house with snow up to the eaves every New Years. And every New Years Eve at midnight we'd watch the Shining. Ever since I was a real little kid. I can't remember the first time I saw it cause I've been watching it my whole life. But all Kubrick's movies made a pretty big impression.

The stuff I saw as a teenager had probably the biggest effect after Kubrick. Movies like Pulp Fiction and Reservoir Dogs, and Trainspotting. And Barbet Schroeder's Reversal of Fortune is probably one of my top 5 movies. And some more recent stuff—Fight Club, the Fifth Element, Gladiator, The Thomas Crown Affair, Any Given Sunday (I'm a sucker for all football movies, and AGS is, like The Citizen Kane of football movies), and stuff like that. I actually think 1999 is one of the best movie years in history.

Older stuff, that I've really only begun experiencing in the last six years are like--I love old comedies, like the Thin Man and Philadelphia Story, you can't beat the dialogue writing in those movies. Coppola's Godfather series is amazing—I think I'm the only person in the universe that likes the last one best. And Howard Hawk's Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. I just saw It's a Wonderful Life for the first time last year, and it totally floored me. Oh and Terry Gilliam.

But I really take more inspiration from writers and philosophers and artists that I do from other filmmakers. What excites me about a movie is the ideas it embodies and the way it expresses them.

**5.) *Why The Surprise? What turned you on to the project?***

I was actually working on a different script that wasn't going very well and I woke up one morning with this story in my head. I don't think I dreamt it, but I have no idea where it came from, it was just there, running around in my brain. And I kinda liked the shape of it. That was immediately interesting. Then as I began working on it I discovered that as much as it seems to be about things that aren't particularly immediate for me, it's really about some things that I struggle with personally every day. Ultimately I did it because it meant something to me, it expressed something that I wanted to explore, and something that, even if I never understood it fully, I wanted to put it up there. That, and it was just time to do something, and it was what I had.

**6.) *Is this the first script you've written?***

No, it's I guess the third, though it's the first short. The first script I wrote didn't turn out to be particularly interesting. The second one is very complex and I haven't been able to make it work yet. Though I've written a couple versions.

**7.) *Was this the first time you had directed your own script?***

Yes, and it was a very different experience. As a director, I always took a lot of licence with scripts, but since, this time I'd written already what I wanted it made directing a very different experience. Also, a big part of what makes drama interesting and good is that the director has his own point of view which may be very similar to the writer's, but is still distinct because it's his. That tension is very productive. The space between people is frequently where the most interesting stuff arises from. It makes the piece a dialogue between people a struggle. The differences in the participants' perception open up the piece and everyone brings a new dimension the piece can explore, which leads to a much richer final product. But since the writer and director were both me, I had to try to capture that somewhat artificially, and occupy the two roles separately and keep from merging them. Besides, when directing someone else's script, you have a comforting distance that was a luxury I didn't get to have on this one.

**8.) *Could you speak a little bit about the difference between theater and film? Was the transition easy or difficult?***

The transition was primarily difficult because of lack of experience. Film is a much bigger thing. First of all, it's much, much more technical. And there's way more people involved and it takes longer overall. Also, while film and theater are pretty much based on the same things, film has additional dimensions that have no corollary in theater. In theater, you get one shot, in film, you can do whatever you want. In many ways that's very liberating, and it's great for directors—it means we have a lot more control—but it also means that there's this whole other dimension that you've never dealt with before. But in the end both theater and film are about examining and expressing something about the human condition. They're both about human interaction and about telling stories. The media though for the transmission of those same basic elements are quite different. They are actually more different than I originally thought.

**9.) *What was the greatest difficulty you encountered while filming The Surprise? How did you manage to overcome it?***

That's a kind of impossible question, because filmmaking is very difficult. It's in many ways just one difficulty after another. You're talking about a dream situation for Murphy's law. There are literally hundreds of elements, even on a little film like ours, that come crashing together and then split apart when the shoot's done. The situation is just begging

for problems. Add to that the fact that I was supposed to be in charge and I'd never done this before, and you've got a recipe for disaster. But as much as a film shoot is a mess caused by the intense nature of the thing, that also gives you something pretty cool. The first few days everything goes wrong and everybody's freaking out and thinking the movie's never going to get finished. But just a week later, everyone's been through so much together and survived that then when stuff happens everyone's sort of like, oh well, we should've known that would happen, groan, but nobody's really worried anymore.

***10.) Could you quickly discuss the visual look of The Surprise and how it came to be?***

We began by looking at the paintings of Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth. Hopper has always been one of my favorite artists, and what we were particularly interested in him for in this piece was the amazing way that his paintings manage to express loneliness. Even the paintings with crowds of people, or no people at all give you such an amazing feeling of alone-ness and emptiness. And we felt that that was the right affect for this film. I basically think that Katie's central problem is that she is fundamentally alone. I think we eventually moved away from Hopper just in the course of the work and making specific decisions about this shot or that shot. But I do think he's still there. I think the sensibility that he created in me and the rest of the team carried on, even if we didn't straight up copy his paintings. Though there are a few direct thefts or homages in the film. The bedroom scene, when Katie's on the phone is really the most complete Hopper moment. The light is the pale yellow or "warm cool" light that Hopper favored. It's coming from off-screen and hitting Katie straight on. That whole scene is as close to Hopper as we get.

***11.) How did you find the editing process?***

I really like editing. Besides it being the first time you get to actually see the movie, it's like putting the movie together like building blocks which I find really fun. And making movies is so fragmented that even though you have great moments all through the process, when you edit, you discover great moments that were always there that you never realized before. And I really like finding the right rhythm and pace for things. All the rest of the time you're getting ready for this, and you're bringing together raw materials, and editing is where you condense it all down into the film—the thing people are going to experience and, hopefully, enjoy. It's very exciting. Plus, Gary, the editor, and I have a very good working relationship. We're both interested in finding the best possible movie and he shoots straight from the hip. I really enjoy the rigor of our process.

***12.) What will you change the next time around?***

Well I would really like it if the camera truck doesn't get so lost it ends up in Philadelphia. Other than that, there's lots of changes I hope to make. Tons, really. I think that's a good thing though. That doesn't mean I'm not happy with the movie, I am. But the process is always challenging you, always raising new questions, always presenting new opportunities. I think if you ever get done with a movie and say, "wow that was perfect, I hope next time is exactly like that," then it's time to quit, because you don't have anything else to say.

***13.) What has surprised you most about the whole experience?***

I don't know that there's really any one thing. I discovered a lot of new things through the experience—I think that's the principle joy of it. But I don't think you can ever be prepared for how hard making a movie is until you've been through it yourself. You can read the books and watch Project Greenlight, but nothing can really make you understand. It's probably not as hard as the army, but that's about it. The other thing that really took me back were the women that I encountered researching this project. It's a little weird being a guy and dealing with a subject like this. First of all, women are really weirded out by it at first. Second, we do not have the natural appreciation for the subject that women do, since we're primarily spectators in the whole situation, whether we like it or not. But the women I met were all so caring and articulate. No woman is without some experience in this. Everyone has at least worried that they might be pregnant at an inopportune moment, even if it's just for the two minutes until the pregnancy test tells them they're not. So all women have had to confront this decision to some small degree. And it's so complicated. It's an area where knowing what's right and wrong and knowing even what you want and don't want is impossible. I truly believe it's one of the hardest situations any person can ever have to face.

***14.) You're also the co-president of a production company, Eighty-Watt Cinema.***

Yup. I'm a control freak, I like to do things my own way. Or sometimes Josh's way.

***15.) How do you feel about the industry in its current state? What about the independent scene? Where do you see yourself and Eighty-Watt fitting in?***

I think Hollywood is being a little stupid, but that doesn't represent much of a change. The difference is that right now the stupidity arises from the fact that Hollywood is not being allowed to run Hollywood at the moment, Wall Street has got hold of the reins. I have no problem with Wall Street except that the film industry is an odd business, and it isn't like other businesses and can't be run the same way, but a lot of the people now handing down the big decisions don't really know much about it. And as far as the independent scene goes, I think it's a little fucked up too. This is all fine, by the way. They've always been in trouble and they probably always will be. That's necessary in an artistic business, it's what allows artists to do what they do. And it gives the young people like me a way in. If it wasn't fucked up then making movies would be like making cereal, and when was the last time cereal really rocked your world? I think Hollywood gets too busy worrying about guaranteeing next quarter's profits to Wall Street and the Independents are too busy feeling marginalized or wishing Hollywood would adopt them to just focus on making a good movie.

***16.) What would you say to other budding filmmakers trying to put together a successful short?***

I say find something that excites you and then dive in, headfirst.

***17.) What's on the horizon?***

More movies, of course.

***18.) What part(s) of The Surprise are you most proud of?***

There are things I'm proud of, and some things I hope no one notices, but I don't really want to tell you what any of them are.

***19.) How do you like to approach a project?***

I like to figure out what I think this whole thing is really about and start exploring that. And as we go through each phase of the process I get the opportunity to look at the project in different ways, as my own perspective changes and as the perspectives of the other people working on the film are introduced. And frequently the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.