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IN CONVERSATION... BILLY THE KID

Programmer Shannon Abel interviews filmmaker Jennifer Venditti

BILLY THE KID is a sensitive and humorous vérité portrait of Billy Price, a 15-year-old growing up in small-town Maine. Billy is, in many ways, like other teenage boys. He's into heavy metal and martial arts, is desperate to find a girlfriend and aspires to a career as an actor and rock star. But in other ways, Billy is unique. A troubled past with behavioural issues has left Billy marked. He refuses to be victimized by these differences and is unapologetic about his personality. As he says, "I'm not black, I'm not white, not foreign...just different in the mind. Different brains, that's all." Billy is funny, sharp, strangely wise for his age, and remarkably candid.

Unfazed by the wireless mike he faithfully wears, Billy allows Jennifer Venditti to follow him to school, to witness candid conversations with his mother and to film the budding romance that develops between him and Heather, a 16-year-old local waitress. He pursues Heather with conviction, but will his intensity scare her away? BILLY THE KID challenges viewers to imagine ourselves beyond labels.

Shannon Abel: How did you meet and come to make a film about Billy?

Jennifer Venditti: I was casting Carter Smith's short film BUGCRUSH in Maine. We had brought all the principal actors from New York and I was looking for extras at the local high school. Sitting in the cafeteria every day, I would look at all the cliques. I remembered it from being in high

school,
but having been out of school for so long it was such a shock to see
that
the same alienation still existed today! One day I sat down with a table
of
"bullies" and asked them if they ever changed it up a bit and invited
different people to their table. They said that they had once, but from
their
stories I gathered that they teased and tortured the kid until he
freaked out
on them. I asked who it was. They pointed to a kid sitting by himself
at a
table and said, "Over there. His name's Billy."
When I first met Billy, I was intrigued—a feeling of awe and discomfort
at
the same time. His openness and ability to say whatever was on his
mind
with pure honesty was so enlightening, but because it wasn't
something I
was used to, I wasn't sure how to process him without feeling
uncomfortable. He had so much information and was so articulate for
his
age, and he had all these cultural references very different from his
peers.
Like everyone else, I immediately wanted to know what was wrong
with
him, what caused him to be this way. But after spending some time
with
him, I was quickly able to let go of trying to figure out his "LABEL" and
instead, focus on his ability to believe in himself and resist conforming
to
society just to fit in. This is something most adults are incapable of! I
saw
Billy as a hero inside the walls of conformity, and thus a triumphant
voice
for humanity.
Originally, my intention was not to make a feature length documentary
but
to include him in a short film. I planned on making a piece that was a
collage of everyday heroes who I had street cast and Billy was just
going to
be one of many. I decided it could be a documentary when Billy fell in
love

for the first time as we were filming. After reviewing the footage after the day of shooting, I found it to be one of the most powerful examples of first time love on film and I thought there was potential to make it into an even bigger story. When I got into several days of filming and was experiencing Billy's life through his eyes, I started reflecting on my own life and understanding things in a new way. Most clearly, I learned how sometimes we see things in our lives the way we want to, rather than how they really are in order to survive life's hardships. As Billy says "sometimes the imaginative world is much better than the real world." The idea that all of us do this in one way or another to protect ourselves really struck me. Furthermore, we live in a time right now where news and documentaries tend to focus on sensationalism and the drama of an outcome rather than the process by which things occur. I saw Billy's story as an opportunity for people to experience a journey rather than serve an idea on a platter. To me the process of filmmaking is powerful when one can initiate a dialogue with the viewer — you present something to the audience, and in exchange they take their own experiences and make their own conclusions from the film. As a result, they may be inspired to view the world and themselves differently.

Is this your first film? What made you decide to become a filmmaker?

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Yes, this is my first film. I've always been an avid people watcher and enjoy

creating stories in my head by daydreaming about my surroundings.

I've

always seen life as some sort of pre-existing film that I was watching. One of the things I do, as a casting director, is that I street scout and enter new environments and discover untold stories. I've been filming the people I cast for years. Whether I was dealing with "real" people, actors, or high fashion models I always knew there were stories beyond the faces and collected hundreds of tapes filled with interviews. It was a natural transition into filmmaking in that although it was inspiring to find these people and cast them in various projects, I knew there were "real" narratives just waiting to be told. One of my gifts is that I have a keen eye that spots something wonderful in the least obvious of places. My instinct is to challenge traditional notions of what we find to be beautiful and heroic. However, when I thought about making a film, I was waiting for that perfect idea that would be something MAJOR and change the world. That kind of pressure is paralyzing! This film came to me in a very organic way, and I didn't understand at the time that it would ultimately be this film that held the impact and weight that I was looking for in a story.

What are some of the biggest challenges you faced while making the film?

Learning how to work as a team was very difficult in that I always want to be in control of a situation to get what I want. But I learned how to collaborate with other people, and really trust what the whole team was saying and allow them to add to my vision rather than feel like they were taking away from it. The whole collaborative process, especially editing, taught me how to exercise patience. Another one of my biggest challenges was the financing. First off, to afford my dream of a breakthrough film, I had to maintain my casting agency while still finding the time to give the film the attention it needed to become what I knew it could be. I was working two full time jobs

simultaneously. Raising additional money through investor support was another hurdle to overcome—even a third full time job! I also learned a great lesson from Billy, in that you have to stay true to what you believe in. People are used to being told what to think. I had to resist the pressure to spell everything out. Not everything is answered in my film — and this is intentional as Billy’s actions and choices have not yet defined his future. As Billy quotes from the Terminator, “the future is unknown, there is no fate but what we make for ourselves...”

What do you want audiences to walk away with after seeing BILLY THE KID?

I want the audience to get to know a character for who he is rather than how he has been labeled. As much as I acknowledge the benefit of a diagnosis, that is not the story I am telling. I would like this film to be about celebrating our differences and realizing our similarities. How we all want the same things in life – acceptance, love and to be understood - and as a result have more compassion for each other and ourselves. We live in a time right now where so many kids have or will be diagnosed with some sort of behavioral disorder. My hope is that people will not let that label be the definition of who they are. Our society is filled with people who have rage whether it is due to bullying, racial or sexual discrimination, domestic issues or just feeling misunderstood. So many times we only hear
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domestic issues or just feeling misunderstood. So many times we only hear about this kind of "outsider" after their emotions have come to fruition in some tragic way. Although Billy has a keen insight to his feelings and a compassionate understanding of others, he still very much struggles

with
the demons from his past and present. His future is unknown but I
hope
that through his story we can start to increase our tolerance and
compassion towards those who we believe are "different" from us.
Hopefully
that will enable us to confront and take responsibility for larger issues
that
stem from that divide.

What does Billy think of the film?

At first it was very emotional for Billy, especially because his dog
Smokey
and cat Chloe have since died. It was very painful for him to see them
on
film. It was also difficult to see himself in situations where he thought
people would interpret him as a bad person, or stupid, or
uncomfortable.
But he hopes that he can use this story to connect with other people
and
also help them feel they are not alone in their personal struggles. He
also
wants people to understand the stories behind the individuals they're
judging. He and Penny both like the film and are happy with the way it
turned out. But he thinks that now that he's done a drama, he wants
to
make an action movie as a sequel! Billy Returns!