

Interview: Director Nanette Burstein is ‘Going the Distance’

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CHICAGO – Nanette Burstein, known mostly for her excellent documentaries “The Kid Stays in the Picture” and “American Teen,” makes her narrative feature film director debut with the comedy “Going the Distance,” with Drew Barrymore, Justin Long, Jason Sudeikis, Christina Applegate and Jim Gaffigan.

Going the Distance is about a modern couple (Barrymore and Long) who have to deal with a bi-coastal long distance relationship. Relative and friends are the roving Greek chorus in the story, advising and – in the case of Justin Long’s buddies Sudeikis and Charlie Day – mocking the couple.



Charlie Day as Dan, Jason Sudeikis as Box, Justin Long as Garrett and Drew Barrymore as Erin in ‘Going the Distance’
Photo Credit: Jessica Miglio for © New Line Cinema and Warner Bros. Pictures

Nanette Burstein talked about her experience on the film and also followed up on her previous documentaries in this second interview with HollywoodChicago.com.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did a director for a reputation for documentaries get involved with a Drew Barrymore romantic comedy?

Nanette Burstein: She wasn’t actually attached when I got involved. It was a script that I really responded to, because it was a very honest, funny movie with a lot of heart and I thought it would be great to make. I’d always wanted to make a feature and it felt like time to go for it.

HC: What did you, screenwriter Geoff LaTulippe and the production crew and cast want to do differently than other romantic comedies?

NB: We wanted it to be without that fairy tale quality that most romantic comedies have. This film is not a fairy tale. It’s got a lot of humor and it’s a sweet film but it’s much more set in the real world. Even just the premise – couple falls in love and end up on opposite sides of the

country – is a very organic premise to the story. There is nothing forced or gimmicky about it and it’s extremely relatable.

HC: You have veteran leading lady Drew Barrymore, and a list of comedy talent like Jason Sudeikis, Christina Applegate, Jim Gaffigan and Charlie Day. How much room did you give everyone for improvisation outside the script?

NB: There was a script? [laughs] I didn’t read it. No, we worked diligently rewriting and rewriting the script, and we did shoot it, but we would also improvise every scene. So 50% of the film is script and 50% is improvisation. It made for long days and made some people a little nervous, ‘wait, aren’t you done yet?’ [laughs]

HC: How specific was the casting. Were the parts filled with everyone you were thinking of, or did the actors that were cast make each part a different type of expression or experience?

NB: As far as the leads, it wasn’t written specifically for them, in fact it was written for people in their twenties, but we thought it would be more potent if the characters were in their early thirties, because when you’re making decisions about your love life and your career – which the film touches upon – it’s more extreme as you get older.

When we cast Drew and Justin we did rewrite to fit more of their personas. But also this is a Drew Barrymore you haven’t seen before, she doesn’t normally throw down the ‘f-bomb’ in her movies. [laughs] And with the supporting cast, I was able to get everyone I had in mind from the start. They were so funny.

HC: There is more of a natural, real-life type bluntness in this comedy, again more than the usual romantic comedy. How was the screenwriter and you trying to reflect a more current society with this bluntness?

NB: Well, first we live in a very mobile society. We don’t necessarily stay where we grew up, because there might not be jobs there. There are a lot more long distance relationships, you fall in love and you can’t control where that is. And in today’s economy, which the film touches upon, you can’t just get a job sometimes. Even if you fall in love with a guy across the country, doesn’t mean you can get a job where he lives. Also women and men’s roles, who makes the sacrifice? Who moves where? Whose career is more important? That doesn’t fit into the old gender roles anymore.

HC: We all know that dying is easy, comedy is hard.

NB: [Laughs] Yeah, I just should have killed them all in the first scene.

HC: [Laughs] How did approach your first feature as a pure comedy, and what did you pull from your previous documentaries that taught you how to fashion a comedy?

NB: Nothing, I was out on my own. [laughs]. There has been a lot of comedy in the documentaries I’ve done, but it’s not scripted, it’s captured in real life. However, when you’re in the editing room you’re cutting it to milk that comedy out of it. You start to understand what comic timing is, and what also grounded comic timing is, because these are realistic moments. You think about how to recreate those moments.

But it definitely was daunting doing a comedy the first time out. I learned a lot because there is such a huge range in comedy and every scene requires a different treatment. If you play a scene too big or too broad, it might not be funny at all. But if you play it too small, it might not get the laugh. You have to rely on your instinct and the editing helps. That’s why you get different takes, to get the choices.

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The Director: Nanette Burstein on the Set in 'Going the Distance'
Photo Credit: Jessica Miglio for © New Line Cinema and Warner Bros. Pictures

HC: You did some fairly stylistic riffing in your previous documentaries. How did you want to stamp your personal style onto a feature narrative, and can you give an example of something that is fingerprinted on the film that you think is your signature?

NB: Well for me the story always dictates the style, so when I was making documentaries I tried to create the style around the story. I don't know if I have one style, but I do like to play with graphic animation, when it helps tell the story and it's fun and playful. So there is fun stuff in the film - a 'Catch Me if You Can' style opening sequence, split screens and a documentary style falling-in-love montage, done with hand-held cameras.

HC: Now that 'American Teen' is two years in the past, what do you think was done right about the marketing and advertising, and what do you think didn't work out as well?

NB: It's hard to market a documentary. And that was a hard one because it was about teenagers, but teenagers don't go see documentaries. And adults think they're not going to be interested in seeing a documentary about teenagers. So that it tough. I thought the artwork was directed at teens, and the problem with that market is that if you're going to go after them, you have to spend a lot of money in advertising, perhaps to fool them into thinking it's not a documentary. When they think documentary, they think they're bored or could watch it on MTV. It might have worked better targeted at an adult art house audience.



Director Nanette Burstein in Chicago, August 11th, 2010
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HC: What was the reaction from where American Teen was filmed, Warsaw, Indiana? Did they feel in your view that they got fair treatment in the documentary?

NB: Yeah, they really liked the film. We went there and did a screening for the whole town. The premiere was a charity for the high school and

they were very pleased. Everyone that was in the movie was very happy and the town was very happy.

HC: What do you think we’ve lost without producers like the era when Robert Evans – who was the subject of your documentary ‘The Kid Stays in the Picture’ – was making films? What is the biggest personality deficit in Hollywood today?

NB: It’s simply a different ball game than when Robert Evans was making movies. Corporate conglomerates were just starting to buy movie studios in those days and Paramount was only five percent of the profit margin for Gulf and Western, so the corporate parent didn’t care really what was going on. It just wasn’t the most important side of their business.

By the end of Robert Evan’s tenure as studio chief, it was 50% or their profit. In the 1970s, it wasn’t about opening weekend. Then in the 1980s, when it became so profitable, it was about advertising and opening on 2000 screens. So good movies don’t have the time to build as they did back then.

Back then, it was personalities, like Robert Evans, that could really drive Hollywood. Because it wasn’t about corporations or playing it safe and blending in. It was about taking risks, and that was what he was all about.

HC: Finally, after exploring a subject like Robert Evans, what do you know about him that you think the rest of the world doesn’t know?

NB: I can’t share that, can I? [laughs]

“Going the Distance” opens everywhere on September 3rd. Featuring Drew Barrymore, Justin Long, Jason Sudeikis, Charlie Day, Christina Applegate and Jim Gaffigan. Screenplay by Geoff LaTulippe and directed by Nanette Burstein. Rated “R.”
[Click here \[15\]](#) for Nannette Burstein’s first interview with HollywoodChicago.com.



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