Women in Film: Spotlight on Three at 2010 Chicago International Film Festival

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on October 19, 2010 - 7:26pm

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CHICAGO – With the breakthrough Best Director win for Kathryn Bigelow (”The Hurt Locker”) at the most recent Academy Awards, women in film are creating their own inroads. Three examples from the 2010 Chicago International Film Festival are Carmen Marron, Naghmeh Shirkhan and Kristin Kaza.

HollywoodChicago.com got the opportunity to talk with these young and impassioned filmmakers at the Festival, each of who made films that meant something to their heart and backgrounds.

Carmen Marron, Writer and Director of “Go For It!”

Carmen Marron made “Go For It!” as a tribute to her Chicago youth, it was almost a story she had to tell.

Carmen Marron at the Chicago International Film Festival, October 15th, 2010
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: What was your background that led you to this film?

Carmen Marron: My background in general, I've always contributed to society, I've always volunteered, and I've worked in government, economic and educational programs. Then I got my Masters and became a guidance counselor and I chose to work in neighborhoods where I grew up like Humboldt Park and Logan Square, in the poorest neighborhood in Phoenix. When I was working there, I began to feel a sense of déja vu and started remembering my life, friends and family. In growing up, these kids were going through the same things that I went through when I was their age. They were making the same mistakes – and despite being so resilient, sharp and smart – they were dropping out of school and screwing up their lives.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did that lead you into film?

Marron: The genesis of that was all of these kids, honesty, were only looking up to people they saw on TV and in movies. They didn't respect the people in their community, their teachers or their parents. They wanted to be these famous people they saw on screen. So I thought I'm going to write a script and make a story about these kids and their families, and what really happens in the inner city.

I revolved it around my experiences, which involved hip-hop and dance, because I used to be a street dancer in Chicago. Kids love dance, it's like a form of expression for them, and so I made this film to hopefully inspire them to have more integrity and goals for themselves.

HollywoodChicago.com: After you wrote the script how did you get the film made?

Marron: I drove out to Los Angeles, thinking I was going to hand my script over to somebody and make my film. After about two years of people closing the door on me I just turned to my husband one day and said, 'the only way this message is going to get out is if I learn to make this film.'

My husband and I save up the money for five and half years and I learned how to produce a film. I also learned how to direct and do my own casting. I cast for a year in Los Angeles and Chicago. I went on MySpace and found 18 songs that I got the license for from these talented local groups.

I went into production two years ago, and put it into ‘breakdowns’ in Los Angeles. All these agents and managers started calling me, and I got 7000 actor inquiries. That’s when I knew I was connecting.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did you come back to Chicago to make the film?

Marron: Even though I was living in Los Angeles, I really wanted to come back to Chicago to make the film. It was about the Logan Square neighborhood, where I got my influence, and I wanted to get the feel of the city. In my film Chicago is another character. I wanted the skyline, but I wanted it from the perspective of Logan Square. I filmed half the film in Chicago and half in Los Angeles.

HollywoodChicago.com: And what has happened since?

Marron: Lo and behold, ‘Go For It!’ was born. We’ve been doing festivals for the past three months and have won three audience awards. And with Chicago, we’re going for a fourth.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is that perfect audience for your film?

Marron: Urban kids, high school and college age, but especially women. Young women love it and their mothers love it, too. Any kid in their teens and twenties who are truly trying to find themselves in this world, but believe they can’t, they really can. They have to believe it.

Naghmeh Shirkhan, Writer and Director of “The Neighbor”

Naghmeh Shirkhan has created an extraordinary human film called “The Neighbor,” about two women who live next to each other in a Canadian city, women who have left their native Iran. The film is about strength and hope, through the connection these women make, including a little girl – the daughter of the younger neighbor – whose presence influences the circumstances of the story.

Naghmeh Skirkhan at the Chicago International Film Festival, Oc-tober 10th, 2010
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: What were you trying to say about mothers in this film?

Naghmeh Shirkhan: I love mothers. My mother was a huge force in forging my own identity. She was a single mother, she was very young and she had two children that she had to support by herself. We were living post the revolution in Iran in the United States in Boston. My father went back to Iran, and we ended up living in the United States. My mother divorced him and we stayed on.

My mother, growing up as a woman in an Islamic area in Iran, she knew the pitfalls of identifying too closely with organized religion. She was the one that said we're going to stay here. My film is a tribute to mothers, my grandmother and my mother.

HollywoodChicago.com: Of the two main women in the film, we know that Shirin was married and Leila is married. Why do you think they don't capitulate to the easy allure of their beauty to make their life easier?

Shirkhan: That came from my own lessons my mother taught me. My mother is still a very stunningly beautiful woman, and to some extent she used her beauty to get what she wanted, but she knew it was not enough. She always said we had to become educated and we have to use our brains, not just to rely on physical beauty. These are the messages I received growing up. You can be beautiful but still maintain a self-awareness and strength, not to give up or give in too easily.

Leila in the film is young, her husband is away and she's raising a child by herself. Any person in that situation would feel the need for a companion. I think she's totally justified in wanting to explore. There is nothing wrong with that. In general, marriage in Iran has women marrying very young, they don't have an opportunity to experience anything outside that first marriage.

HollywoodChicago.com: History has a way of abusing the feminine spirit. What has been the most profound blossoming of that spirit in your lifetime?

Shirkhan: On a very personal level, I would have to say it is my own journey. I am a self-made person, I didn't have wealthy parents, I went

to school on scholarship and I had my own dreams and ambitions. I feel like I was able to learn by observing, and it is a good example for any other woman. If you have desire and discipline, plus a vision of what your life can be, you can attain it. And you don't have to sacrifice yourself in any way.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your characters survive as they needed to, outside their traditional boundaries. What fear do these women have about becoming their mother's daughter?

Shirkhan: To a large extent they are trying to forge their own identities apart from their mothers, but I think it's very important in doing that to recognize what our mothers have sacrificed and the things that they've done – to understand their life from their perspective and circumstances. In doing that it's very likely you will repeat that cycle. For the character Shirin it's very important to come full circle and understand what it might have been like for her mother.

HollywoodChicago.com: There are some symbols in the film that were prevalent – a released balloon, the lingering of the small child putting on some slippers to go somewhere and the 'No Exit' sign between the neighbor's doorways. As a director who is trying to combine narrative with visual elements, how do you develop symbols like that? Is it something written in the script or does it flow from the actual production?

Shirkhan: I visualized a lot of it beforehand. As far as the No Exit sign was concerned, we needed to keep that door closed for the production reasons, and the best sign to put there was the No Exit sign. It felt perfect. Once we got into the rhythm of the shooting it was ideal, because these were two women who felt trapped. It's a prison that is sort of self-made, a confinement that is self inflicted.

I'm a big fan of [Jean-Paul] Sartre and I love his play 'No Exit,' I thought the sign was very existential. You can be captive in your surroundings, or you can make a conscious decision to break down the walls, to knock on the door and to make the intrusion to learn something about yourself.

HollywoodChicago.com: What advice would you give an 18 year old woman, as she goes into the portal of adulthood, on keeping her feminine spirit strong?

Shirkhan: First and foremost, educate yourself, and don't be afraid of appearing too smart. Don't be afraid of not fitting in, because eventually that person who doesn't fit in will be leading the way. It's very important to learn about ourselves as individuals, to be able to do things with other players, but never to forget we're individuals first, who can educate ourselves, and we can be curious. You can establish boundaries, and then no one can take advantage of you.

HollywoodChicago.com: Both women in the film are very beautiful, how can individual women strike a balance with beauty, so they won't exploit it or have it exploit them? How do we do that as a culture?

Shirkhan: We teach our daughters that there are boundaries, there are certain things that are appropriate for their age, and certain things that aren't. You keep telling them that, and hopefully they will learn. Because when it comes time to put on that make-up or wear tight clothing or stiletto heels, maybe they decide not to do it, because their self-worth is not coming from the outside.

I came from a family of very beautiful women. And I saw how their beauty destroyed them in some ways. The paradox with my mother is that she always told me to learn from what she said, don't learn from the way she acted. I'm not saying to take that route, but as a parent you have a responsibility for a young girl to show her that physical beauty is a miniscule part of who they are. The rest comes from within, and that takes a lot more work.

Kristen Kaza, Producer of "Fish Out of Water"

Although Kristen Kaza's film, "Fish Out of Water," was not part of the Chicago International Film Festival, it has caused quite a splash in its run of the last couple of years. Speaking with Kaza at an after-party, she talked about the background of her unusual documentary, an exposé on the seven Bible verses that opponents of gay Americans and marriage discrimination use to justify their bigotry. Kaza and her director Ky Dickens crisscrossed the country and spoke to religious leaders in all states to elucidate these crucial biblical passages.

Kristen Kaza at the Chicago International Film Festival, October 11th, 2010
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: After making this documentary, what did you come away with regarding religion as a force in America and the scapegoating of gay men and women through those communities?

Kristen Kaza: People will sometimes say 'I'm atheist or I don't practice so this film is not relevant to me.' We feel it's relevant to everyone because the root of discrimination against GLBT people is the Bible. Or should I say the way the Bible is manipulated and used. So it's extremely powerful because religion infiltrates every bit of our lives.

What we wanted to do was give people the tools to talk about it, and we stepped back from having an agenda, our agenda was merely to educate. We used theologians, bishops and ministers from all backgrounds around the country to help break down these verses and stories for us. We let them tell the story and we illustrated it with animation.

The whole premise of the movie is that this is a huge part of our lives and it affects everything. One of the bishops said, 'the church always has a victim. If you look back and note whenever there is controversy, it leads to conversation. Which leads to progression.' It has been and it is the case that gay people are victims right now, but I think we are seeing a shift.

The 46th Chicago International Film Festival is October 7th-21st, 2010. For more information and to purchase tickets, click on ChicagoFilmFestival.com *[13]*

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Source URL (retrieved on *Apr 17 2024 - 2:38pm*):
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