

Interview: Bobcat Goldthwait Shoots Idiocy in the Face in ‘God Bless America’

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CHICAGO – Embarrassments both mortifying and tragic are viewed through a cathartically hilarious and disarmingly humanistic lens in the cinema of Bobcat Goldthwait. Over the last decade, the “Police Academy” star has emerged as one of the most gifted cinematic satirists in America. His comedic targets are often audaciously provocative and there’s always a wealth of sincerity within the snark.

His jaw-dropping 2003 farce “Windy City Heat” allegedly duped a talentless actor Perry Caravello into unknowingly joining a phony production that promised instant stardom. 2006’s “Sleeping Dogs Lie” charted the downward spiral of a young woman’s personal life after she came clean about her dappling in bestiality, while 2008’s “World’s Greatest Dad” featured a career-best performance from Robin Williams as a father who took advantage of a sudden tragedy to make a last-ditch attempt at happiness.

Goldthwait’s latest film is “God Bless America,” a brutally scathing indictment of America’s increasingly vapid culture. Joel Murray stars as Frank, an embittered man who decides to take down all the obstreperous vexations in modern society with the aid of a gun-toting teen, Roxy (Tara Lynne Barr). Hollywood Chicago spoke with Goldthwait about everything from Preston Sturges and “nonversations” to his film’s controversial critique of Diablo Cody.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve mentioned that you were inspired to make this film after seeing Adam Wingard’s thriller “A Horrible Way to Die,” with Joe Swanberg. Care to elaborate?

Bobcat Goldthwait: I love Joe. It wasn’t the genesis of my film, but I was sitting there watching it and going, “Hey, you’ve got a script that tonally kind of felt [similar]—why don’t you go make it?”

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you detect humor in that film?

Goldthwait: Oh yeah, especially with Joe. He’s a funny guy, even when he’s not trying to be funny.



Bobcat Goldthwait, director of GOD BLESS AMERICA, a Magnet Release.

Photo credit: Magnet Releasing

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you think attracts comedians to filmmaking?

Goldthwait: It's the storytelling [aspect]. I think that's probably why there are a lot of comedians who make films, even someone like Barry Levinson. I think I'm more akin to someone like Tod Browning. He did comedy. As a comedian, when you're in a nightclub, you have to keep the dumbest person in the room occupied. You have to entertain them or they're going to become a heckler or worse.

[cell phone goes off in the room]

Goldthwait: Don't worry. I'm not Frank, I'm not going to shoot you. [laughs] I was at a screening of the movie and I got a text and was like, "Holy f—k! I don't get a free pass." So I had to leave the theater to answer the text and hoped that no one saw me. ... When you make a movie, you get to tell longer stories and they don't have to be "joke-joke-joke," so maybe that's why many comedians make the leap.

HollywoodChicago.com: How closely aligned are your personal peeves with those of Frank? Do you detest Rush Limbaugh, Simon Cowell and the word "sensual" with the same amount of spite?

Goldthwait: Sensual doesn't set me off. [laughs] The existence of these people doesn't bother me at all. I think our appetite for them is what I have a problem with. That's what this movie is about. I don't really have an ax to grind with a kid who would want to star on "My Super Sweet 16," but I do question our appetite for the kid. Here's the difference—in the movie, Frank goes and shoots the girl. If this was supposed to be a biopic, it would've been about me blowing up the MTV building. [laughs] That's the difference. I f—king hate MTV. I don't really care about the people on it. So Frank is just reactive, I'd be a little more [practical].

HollywoodChicago.com: The subject matter would be considered shocking in the hands of other filmmakers, but your films are much more thoughtful and serious-minded in a comedic way. How are you able to find the right tone?

Goldthwait: At the end of "21 Jump Street," a guy gets his dick shot off and then he puts it in his mouth. I think that's way more shocking than anything I've ever filmed. Yet it's not shocking because it's so unbelievable and you have nothing invested in the characters. If I was going to do that, it would be a whole movie leading up to that point when the guy has to go through with it and we'd all feel horrible about it, but also probably understand him and have empathy for him. That's enough for a whole movie for me. I don't need a topper. Sometimes people will hear that ["Sleeping Dogs Lie"] is a movie about bestiality. It's not about bestiality, I just needed a MacGuffin that the characters couldn't get past.

If you're not familiar with my movies and hear about the things that happen in them, you would think that they are just one-joke shock movies. If you lack empathy, the movies don't work for you as comedies, because you have to sit there and go, "If I was in this situation, it would be horrible or embarrassing." I like how Preston Sturges made movies where even if the leads were silly, they were kind of believable. The peripheral characters can be really one-dimensional and silly, and then you can explore dark things like killing your wife [in "Unfaithfully Yours"] or posing as a war hero [in "Hail the Conquering Hero"] or posing as your dead son in order to be a writer in "World's Greatest Dad." Those are the movies that mean something to me.



Joel Murray and Tara Lynne Barr star in GOD BLESS AMERICA, a Magnet Release.

Photo credit: Magnet Releasing

HollywoodChicago.com: Watching your film's satirical jabs at the exploitative nature of Reality TV, I was reminded of Perry Caravello, the exploited star of your practical joke documentary "Windy City Heat." Would Frank shoot you for that?

Goldthwait: Yes, Frank would shoot me. I'm guilty too. [laughs] I've always felt that. When we made that movie, Jimmy [Kimmel] was like, "Dude, you have to finish this because if you don't, Perry's dreams aren't going to come true." I'm not going to pretend I'm not dirty. That's what this movie is about. The subtext is that Frank realizes he's just as guilty when he suddenly finds himself actually contemplating this idea of running off with this underage girl. That's when the house of cards comes down. He realizes that he's no better than the people that he's killing—or marginalizing in a huge way. [laughs] The movie's about the ultimate marginalizing of people. "You want to be an idiot? Fine." BLAM!

HollywoodChicago.com: It seemed strange that Diablo Cody would be a target of hatred in the film until I realized that Roxy, the character that hates her, is in many ways reflective of Juno. The line about Cody also starts to show a schism between her and Frank. Was that intentional?

Goldthwait: That was the reason. Frank needs to say, "I don't need to kill people that don't deserve to die. They have to deserve to die." There are two reasons why it's Diablo Cody. One is that my daughter is funny, and whenever someone says, "You're funny. You're like Juno," she's [exasperated]. The other thing is that I realized you are what you hate, and clearly this character who is reminiscent of the Diablo Cody character would hate that. So to me, that made sense. I do feel bad if Diablo Cody is upset because I naively thought—I tried to think of myself. If I was watching this movie and someone said, "We should kill Bobcat Goldthwait. Suddenly he's an artist now? He's the guy from 'Police Academy.' What a pretentious f—king blowhard," I would go, "Well done, nicely played." But then I realized that poor [Diablo] is more insecure than I thought. I listened to her on Marc Maron and was like, "Oh you poor nut. Don't try changing the formula just because you're trying to win over the critics. The formula works. You're not going to be happy with the end product if you're trying to win over people that don't like what you do."

HollywoodChicago.com: So Roxy is somewhat of a self-loathing Juno?

Goldthwait: Yeah, you are what you hate. That's what I've always learned in my comedy. If all of a sudden, I'm attacking someone, I'll step back and go, "Oh, you don't like that part of you." So I just thought that made sense. In hindsight, if she is upset, that would bother me. She wrote a blog where she said that she was disappointed with me. I wanted to say, "Look, the gun dealer [in my movie] goes off on this hugely racist rant and goes totally unchallenged." The arms dealer is played by the actual guy who brings our guns to the set. I went, "Mike, I want to put you in this scene." So I just pulled up the "Taxi Driver" scene where he goes to buy the guns, and Joel had just dislocated his shoulder, so he's super-high in that scene. Joel looks at the scene and goes, "It's good I don't have that many lines." He was as high as a kite. And the guy's like, "Is it okay that I'm as racial as they are in that ['Taxi Driver'] scene?" And I said yeah because that's how that character would talk. I don't think his racism should go unacknowledged. I write characters who don't necessarily agree with what I think. I'm actually a Green Day fan even though Roxy thinks they should kill Green Day. And then I felt bad because I went, "Aw f—k, I like Green Day, those guys are nice," but I know that my daughter would f—king hate Green Day. So it just rang true for me.



Tara Lynne Barr stars in GOD BLESS AMERICA, a Magnet Release.

Photo credit: Magnet Releasing

HollywoodChicago.com: What would you want to see changed in society? Is the message of your movie ultimately that people should be nicer to one another?

Goldthwait: It sounds very trite, but it is what I really mean. The weird thing about the movies I make is that I am sincere in all of them. When you're snarky, you don't have to actually say something, but if you come out and say, "I want people to be nice", that sounds kind of insane in this day and age. I really have a problem with, as my wife calls them, "nonversations." That's when people are just talking about stuff they've heard but it's only just second-, third-hand regurgitations of non-stories that aren't important. That scene in the film where Frank talks about [the "nonversations"] always kills me. And then Tom Kenny goes, "Oh you're bad!" [laughs] I've known Tom Kenny since we were six. He's the voice of Spongebob and has been on "Mr. Show." He and his wife Jill Talley, who's from Chicago, supplied a lot of the fake radio and fake news and TV shows in the film. It's just him and a couple other guys who did it. I'd like to do a whole feature with him.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the experience like of seeing this film with an audience?

Goldthwait: It was really strange. It premiered at the Toronto Film Festival and I actually changed some stuff after that. But I had been editing the movie up until Tuesday and it played Friday. I really was hoping that the story would work for them. It was the midnight screening with 1,400 people, and they started cheering Joel's earlier speeches. I started welling up and I looked over at Joel. I didn't necessarily want people to agree with whatever Frank was saying, I just wanted the characters to work for the [audience]. But when they were agreeing with the characters and getting so into it, it did make me well up. It was a wonderful and horribly embarrassing experience.

I was also super-happy for Joel. When we were filming those scenes, it was really frustrating. He felt like he wasn't giving me what I wanted, and I kept telling him that it was good. The last time I felt like that was on "World's Greatest Dad," when I shot the scene where Robin is on the talk show and he starts laughing and crying at the same time. That wasn't what was on the page. We both felt like it wasn't working, and I said, "Let's just play how absurd all of this is." He said, "What do you mean?" and I said, "Everything—how tired we are, our personal lives," and then he just did that. It was the same thing with Joel. He was getting frustrated and I told him, "Use that frustration. Just be as upset as you really are." That's what ended up in the movie.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was Joel always your first choice for the lead?

Goldthwait: I wrote it with nobody in mind. Joel and I have just been friends for a long time. My wife said, "You should have Joel," and when she said that, I went, "He's perfect." When I sent him the script, he had no idea I was asking him to be Frank. He went, "Who am I, the boss?" I said I wanted him to be Frank, and he went, "Wow, I've never been number one on a call sheet before." He's so good. You have a young girl bouncing off the walls, and Joel is so grounded. The only difference between Joel and I is that Joel keeps everything inside. So for him to be that vulnerable—it's not in his wheelhouse. I'm the emotional one, sometimes you'll see tears. [laughs] Joel was convinced that he was playing me, I say that he's not. But he still insists that he is.

'God Bless America' stars Joel Murray, Tara Lynne Barr, Melinda Page Hamilton, Rich McDonald and Mackenzie Brooke Smith. It was written and directed by Bobcat Goldthwait. It will be released May 11th at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema. It is rated R.



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