

Interview: Jack C. Newell, Ron Falzone Chat Up Chicago Indie ‘Close Quarters’

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CHICAGO – Director Jack C. Newell ended up meeting one of his great collaborators while taking classes at Columbia College Chicago. His future filmmaking partner turned out to not be a fellow peer, but his teacher, Ron Falzone. Together, they made the acclaimed short, “Typing,” about two Hollywood screenwriters whose brainstorming session draws inspiration from the clacking of typewriter keys in the next room.

Newell and Falzone’s first feature effort is “Close Quarters,” an endearing and insightful collection of parallel vignettes set in a Chicago coffee shop. Baristas Abby (Erica Unger) and Barry (Seth Unger) flirt with the possibility of long-term romance while observing the dysfunctional relationships of their customers. Two friends, Patrick (TJ Jagodowski) and Olivia (Kate Duffy), chat upstairs while their respective partners, Dina (Holly Laurent) and Cary (Dave Pasquesi), make love in the downstairs bathroom. An estranged couple (Susan Messing and Jim Carlson) argue over Skype while unlikely friendship blooms between a depressive young woman (Jet Eveleth) and a compassionate gentleman (Tim Kazurinsky). A group of bridesmaids bicker about their absent friend while a quartet of mourners chuckle warmly about the mysteries of existence.

The ensemble features 24 improv artists whose dialogue was deftly arranged and condensed by writer Falzone, director Newell and editor Jill DiBiase. The film will have its Chicago premiere at the Gene Siskel Film Center on May 12th. Hollywood Chicago spoke with Newell and Falzone about the unique challenges presented by this project, the art of directing improv and the inherently voyeuristic nature of city life.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did this project come about?

Jack C. Newell: We had been working on it for about two years. It started off as conversations about coffee shops like Starbucks and how they’ve created the “third space”—it’s not work or home. It’s not necessarily new in terms of culture. It’s like the Roman bathhouses. But coffee shops are everything. You can have people signing their divorce papers next to a couple going on a first date. It’s an interesting kind of melting pot. Even if I had a big budget to work with, I’d want to make a story about people and relationships. ... I find that a lot of independent filmmakers make a copy of whatever is in the cinema right now. That’s why you have a lot of mobster movies in Chicago. “You’ve seen ‘The Untouchables,’ but let’s do it again with one sixteenth of the budget.”

Ron Falzone: I told everybody that what I’m proudest about with “Close Quarters” is that it’s the first movie shot in Chicago that’s not about an aging hit man wondering about the choices he’s made in his life. [laughs] ... In terms of the basic structure, I love the idea of characters who are revealed not just through their dialogue but through the subtle actions between them. Putting them at tables and, in one case, in the bathroom, didn’t allow for big broad actions. When I started piecing together the scenarios, I could start to see the patterns in the stories. The structural ideas that Jack presented me with were very interesting.



Cinematographer Stephanie Dufford and director Jack C. Newell on the set of Close Quarters.

Photo credit: Nefarious Productions

HollywoodChicago.com: Was there anything in the film that was scripted?

Newell: The scenes with the baristas were basically scripted, but we did improvise a lot of it onset. ... For the casting of the baristas, I didn't want to manufacture a relationship. Seth and Erica, who play the baristas, have actually been married for a long time. Seth used to act and now works for a design firm in town. Erica has been in many commercials. The entire film was hinging on these two characters and I didn't want to build their relationship from scratch.

Falzone: My favorite moment in this whole process came during the third cut when Jack walked up to me rather sheepishly and said, "I have to cut that line about marriage." And I looked at him and said, "What the f—k do I care?" Honestly, that was the fun part about doing this. You weren't thinking in terms of, "This is mine," or, "This is his." You were thinking, "What is the complete picture?"

HollywoodChicago.com: Were there any films that served as influences?

Newell: I'd say "Before Sunrise" and "Before Sunset" were crucial. I don't think we necessarily talked about it while making the film. We talked about weird things. The opening is a mix of "Love Me Tonight" and "Grand Prix."

Falzone: We always used to talk about the final shot. You'd say that was your "Big Night" shot, and I'd say, "No, it's your 'Flavor of Green Tea Over Rice' shot." I just know better movies. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: How much footage were you working with?

Newell: We have forty hours of footage, so we have the shooting ratio of a documentary.

Falzone: I turned that into 506 pages of transcript that eventually became a ninety-page script. The script I wrote was used as a launching pad for the editor. It is a weird way to do a movie in that you write the script after the film is shot.

Newell: The cross-cutting raises each of the storylines. A lot of the connections between the stories were made apparent in the edit when we put them together. When the old guys are talking about how people are basically f—ked up and hate one another, they're echoing something that the other group said five minutes ago. The lovers upstairs gave us a really nice arc. TJ and Kate are incredible actors. Most people who see the film really connect with their story. When you cut between that couple and the lovers downstairs, it really puts you on edge. One of the most cinematic techniques we have in the film is the editing.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the advantage of shooting the footage in ten-minute segments with the Canon 5D?

Falzone: What I thought was great about the breaks was Jack would give direction to make sure the actors staid on some kind of through-line because there were times when they would go off on tangents. I was in the basement doing "The Lives of Others." I sat at my computer with a headset on, and I only came up on the set once or twice a night. For the rest of the time, I was down there logging the beats. I wanted to know what the beats were because, in a lot of cases, the plots became completely different from the scenarios we had planned. The first step I did in my adaptation was put the beats together and see which ones created a through-line.



Erica Unger and Seth Unger star in Jack C. Newell's *Close Quarters*.

Photo credit: Nefarious Productions

HollywoodChicago.com: Was there any scene that had to be entirely reshot?

Newell: The scene of the mourners in the film was the second time we shot the scene. The first time we shot it, we had five actors rather than four, and it was a slightly different cast. That went so blue that it just didn't fit into the film.

Falzone: It was also our first improvisation, and it was nerve-racking to us that it had gone that blue. ... The bridesmaids were meant to be the broad comedy. If another scene went broad, there wouldn't have been any balance.

Newell: It was very, very funny, but...

HollywoodChicago.com: It was more of the DVD extra variety.

Newell: Exactly. It would've been so different with that in there, and we gave enough room in our schedule for us to add another shooting day. Each scene took about five hours from lighting to breaking down the set.

HollywoodChicago.com: How is this film different from other improv-based Chicago indies, particularly those that have been labeled "Mumblecore"?

Falzone: I don't think this film is similar to Mumblecore in that Mumblecore is deliberately masturbatory. That's kind of the purpose of it. These are characters who are trying to reveal themselves, whereas the characters in "Close Quarters" are trying to reveal something about life. This is not confessional drama, this is human drama.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was there ever a moment during the editing process when you became nervous about the final result?

Falzone: The first cut was pretty scary, but I wasn't uncomfortable because I knew the material was good. It was just a matter of putting the puzzle pieces together. For me, it was the third cut when I could start to see where the movie was going. When I look at the movie and remember what was in my head when we first started talking about it, the film is prettier than I imagined, and I mean that in the very positive sense of the term. I knew it was going to be low-budget, but when I saw the quality of the footage, I went, "Wow, this is a good-looking film." The cinematographer, Stephanie Dufford, is so good. She's the first credit you see in the film, and I thought that was a nice one to start with.

HollywoodChicago.com: The use of split screen in the film reminded me of "Conversations with Other Women."

Newell: "Conversations with Other Women" was great, and I hadn't thought about it when we were doing it...

Falzone: I had. [laughs]

Newell: I shot it with the option of using split screen because I like the technique so much.

Falzone: I told him that he could do the whole film that way because it was so beautiful.

Newell: But it really wasn't until I went to an installation art film screening, "Gorilla Vs. Shark." They had three screens set up and the film took place over each them. That's when we took the split screen concept and tried to run with it more.

Falzone: We were doing two- or three-camera set-ups on everything, so there was always the matched action. There are mirrors around the table where the mourners sit and you're watching their reactions through the mirrors and they are all absolutely truthful to the moment. I don't think that could've been done if you didn't have a couple camera set-ups.

HollywoodChicago.com: The split screen also allows the four lovers to appear trapped within their respective frames.

Newell: That's a hundred percent right. The idea of cutting between the four characters, each of them in split screens, shows that they all feel trapped. It allows the four people to interact with each other when two of them are trapped in the basement. How do you have a moment with TJ upstairs and Holly downstairs? Split screen is a way for you to do that. It plays like they're all in the same room.



Tim Kazurinsky and Jet Eveleth star in Jack C. Newell's *Close Quarters*.

Photo credit: Nefarious Productions

HollywoodChicago.com: What inspired you to cast Dave Pasquesi as the man trapped in the bathroom? To me, he's the darkest character in the film.

Newell: Dave is awesome. He's my favorite thing about the film. If you've seen him in "Strangers With Candy"...you'll know that's he's not a good guy in that either.

Falzone: Right after we were done shooting, I was talking with Sheldon Patinkin, and I told him that we used Dave Pasquesi. Before I said anything else, he goes, "He can get pretty dark." [laughs]

Newell: Comedians are dark folk. What motivates them to be so funny is their need to escape from their dark side. I personally like the pathos of comedy. There's darkness in everyone here, but Dave is the blackest of black. To be completely honest, he took it to a scarier, realer place than I think any of us expected. We shot the scene in a real bathroom, and it was me and Stephanie trapped in the corner with our cameras. I didn't want to give the actors a break because if they had a chance to go out and come back in, I felt that we were going to lose what we had been building up to. It ended up unlocking something dark and scary in all of us.

Falzone: I think the harshest line in the whole film is, "I'm not saying women are crazy, I'm saying you're crazy." When I heard Dave say that line for the first time, I just [gasped]. It's the line where if you write it and read it on the page, it seems like you could make a laugh out of it. But he didn't.

HollywoodChicago.com: Tell me about the local company, Nefarious Productions, that produced this film.

Newell: It's the production company of our executive producer Joe Rosengarten. This is his company's first production. Joe and I met a number of years ago. He took some improv classes, I was doing some sketch comedy stuff, and he got involved in that. He helped another local filmmaker, Nick Martin, on his feature ["Buzzard Country"] before he worked on ours. He also gave some money to "Typing." He's also the vice president of an aluminum trading company. They buy aluminum scrap, melt it down and resell it, and he just decided that he'd like to film more than aluminum. Go figure.

Falzone: It's important to me that this was an all-Chicago production. It was done entirely in the city and the ensemble is Chicago-based. To me, the film is about Chicago and the mores of the city at this moment. The main reason why you see the L train a lot in the movie is because we were shooting next to the L tracks. Occasionally, in the middle of the improv, the train would go by and you'd hear it, so we had to justify

that. It was less about establishing Chicago than fixing a production problem.

HollywoodChicago.com: The film also captures the voyeurism inherent in urban life.

Newell: Definitely. When you're in a coffee shop, you often find yourself drawn to the conversations of others.

Falzone: I always liken it to being on a bus where someone on a cell phone will have a long and involved conversation about their sex life. Everybody on the train thinks they're in this private bubble, but of course they're not. Everybody's hearing what you're saying, and that happens in coffee shops. Coffee shops and buses are the center of our voyeuristic life. We love our ability to be voyeurs and we hate other people watching us.

'Close Quarters' stars Bill Arnett, Mark Belden, Jim Carlson, Colleen Doyle, Kate Duffy, Erica Elam, Jet Eveleth, Noah Gregoropoulos, Lyndsay Hailey, Gregory Hollimon, TJ Jagodowski, Bruce Jarchow, Tim Kazurinsky, Sherra Lasley, Holly Laurent, Nicky Margolis, Susan Messing, Danny Mora, Linda Augusta Orr, Dave Pasquesi, Erica Unger and Seth Unger. The screenplay based on cast improvisations was by Ron Falzone and directed by Jack C. Newell.

"Close Quarters" screens from Saturday, May 12, 2012 to Monday, May 14, 2012 at the Gene Siskel Film Center. Newell, Falzone and select members of the cast and crew will be present at all screenings. For tickets, [visit here](#) [12]. For more information on "Close Quarters," [visit here](#) [13].



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