

## Interview: Director Craig Zobel of Controversial ‘Compliance’

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CHICAGO – Audience walk-outs, yelling matches at Q&As and accusatory comments have all greeted screenings of “Compliance,” written and directed by Craig Zobel. The controversial film, which focuses on a mysterious caller claiming to be the police, has been stirring the pot regarding human beings and their relationship with authority.

“Compliance” is set in a familiar yet unattractive world, backstage at a fast food restaurant. The put-upon manager Sandra (Ann Dowd) receives a call that claims one of her employees named Becky (Dreama Walker), is stealing from customers. What transpires is a whole day of caller instructions regarding how to handle Becky, and the results tests the limits of how humanity reacts when dealing with crime, punishment and authoritarianism. The screenplay was also written by director Zobel, who based it on human behavior experiments and true incidents of those type of callers in different settings.



Ann Dowd (Sandra) Takes the Call in Craig Zobel's 'Compliance'  
*Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures*

Craig Zobel is a bit surprised by the strong reaction to his incendiary film, but he is challenging it head on. During an interview with HollywoodChicago.com, Zobel never blinked when confronted with the more contentious issues of the film.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Why do you think audience members actually get angry at this film? Are you turning the lens back toward them?

**Craig Zobel** When I first heard of the audience reactions to the film, my reaction was one of resistance, as in I would never do that. Those people might do that but not me. Upon further reflection, I thought it was interesting that A – that yes, that type of reaction could happen, and B – isn't it weird that I immediately thought I wouldn't be that type of person who would react in that way? I think 100% of people, if you ask them, would also say they're not that person. That can't be the case if these reactions are happening, right?

**HollywoodChicago.com:** I read that part of the background for your script is based on a Yale study regarding human behavior in authority reaction situations. What intrigues you about the notion of human obedience and true incidents of such behavior that led to 'Compliance'?

**Zobel:** I was really fascinated with Stanley Milgrim's Yale studies on obedience, plus the Stanford University obedience study of prisoners, among others. My initial interest is similar to my first answer, in that no one imagines themselves as obedient. That's not an attribute that is necessarily 'cool.' [laughs] It happens, though, that people are. I'm fascinated by that gap. It's not something that people want to be, but it's definitely there.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** We base our societal structure to prevent anarchy based on obedience to authority. Where are the cracks in that system and what happens if the buy-in is not complete, vis a vis what you are projecting in "Compliance"?

**Zobel:** Authority is given, you give it away to – for example – the police. You give them the authority to serve and protect you, and you trust they will not abuse that, for what you have given will have been done in vain. The problem there is balance, is there another side to insure that the cooperation and trust is not being broken? Therein lies the crack. Is journalism, as another example, there to fill that role?

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You got an extraordinary actress to play Becky, the so-called 'victim' in this scenario. What did she understand about the vulnerability and complicit nature of her character, that others you auditioned did not?

**Zobel:** In one of our first discussions of the character, Dreama [Walker] would talk about how if enough people were insisting that something happened accusing Becky, that the character would question their role in that accusation – 'maybe I did shortchange somebody,' or 'what did I do wrong that people are misunderstanding as something worst?' So she starts from that place in her performance. Which is not a good place to start in a predatory situation.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You intentionally set the events in the midst of a working class, lower-end social structure in a fast food workplace. Were you making a statement about the socio-economic status of the representatives who took the call, and acted on it?

**Zobel:** It's a bit complicated, but the quick answer is do people think that the characters are stupider, or have a lower I.Q.? I get really defensive about that, because I don't think it's about stupid people at all. I think that this kind of thing can happen, and does happen, in even more complicated socio-economic levels. But there is something very unique in the corporate structure of the fast food industry, which is all about making sure that everything is the same everywhere. Whenever you're in that state of mind, in order for the corporation to make sure that happens there has to be a hierarchal structure that can contribute to the type of obedience in the film.



Dreama Walker (Becky) is Caught in the Middle in 'Compliance'  
Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What type of atmosphere did you especially want to create regarding the awful environment of the fast food restaurant. What did you want to communicate regarding both the evil and better angels of such workers and patrons?

**Zobel:** In looking at the multiple cases of such incidents, not everyone was the same in each case, but there were paradigms that were repeated, and personality types that were there. I felt there were all types of ways people can make a bad decision, and end up in this situation. For example, the character of Kevin can represent the person who observes it's wrong enough to be involved, but doesn't really stop anything from happening. I feel like all the characters have a variation of that reaction working inside them.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** This film is highly symbolic regarding authoritarianism. Can you think of an instance in your own life where you trusted an authority figure, only to realize later that the trust was misplaced?



**Zobel:** Before I worked as a director, I was a below-the-line production manager for a lot of low budget independent films. And there were times when it was apparent that we were making people work extremely long hours, sometimes 19 hour days, and then I would let them get in their cars and drive home. That’s dangerous. But I was in the middle of the management pack, and I never disagreed with it or told anybody to stop. That is a time where nothing happened, but people certainly were at risk.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How did you get the actors to understand where all of this was going when you were on-set? What there reluctance at times to buy-in or were you able to communicate your direction succinctly?



Craig Zobel in Chicago, August 20, 2012  
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**Zobel:** The way I direct people was not about me cajoling them into anything. It’s not the way I do things. I’ve had variations of this question asked to me, but in different forms, like ‘don’t you think YOU’RE the caller?’ [laughs] Not really. On set we didn’t go through every scene in rehearsal, making decisions, but we did all talk about the film in the abstract beforehand. So before we made one shot, we did get together over coffee and beers to discuss it.

I was struggling with Bill Camp’s character [Van] the most, of all the roles that was the most difficult in figuring out where the mind would go. Camp was in the same boat, but it really became about what was going on in that character’s head. Which is why I made the movie, it was to try to understand that stuff. The work I was doing with the actors was ‘...that’s where I have to go to get there, this way or that way.’ It was very interesting in those instances.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Finally, getting back to angry reactions to the film. Why do you think human beings hate to think about getting fooled in such a way, and how would you give them advice on how to mollify that emotion?

**Zobel:** I don’t know how to help people who are angry about it, really. I can say this, though – let’s keep talking through this. In this discussion and the anger, my understanding of what it all is, it’s still growing as we keep talking. I will say something that I wouldn’t have said a couple weeks ago, if you do hear that voice in the back of your head that is dissenting, instead of pushing it away at least give yourself enough time to listen to it, and get a second opinion in your head, as to what is going on. There is a way to beat this very human behavior.

*“Compliance” continues its limited release in Chicago on August 31st. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Anne Dowd, Dreema Walker, Pat Healy, Bill Camp and Phillip Ettinger. Written and directed by Craig Zobel. Rated “R”*



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