

Interview: Damien Echols, Lorri Davis Travel ‘West of Memphis’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 15, 2013 - 3:26pm

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CHICAGO – The story of the West Memphis Three is not over. Yes, Damien Echols, Jason Baldwin, and Jessie Misskelley are finally, mercifully, out of jail but questions still linger about who really killed three children two decades ago. And Echols has to deal with life outside of prison with his wife Lorri Davis as the whole world is new to him and thousands are so grateful for his release. The two recently came to Chicago to speak about “West of Memphis,” the fourth major film about the West Memphis Three from director Amy Berg and producers Peter Jackson & Fran Walsh. They are insightful and nearly zen-like as you would expect they’d have to be to deal with so much pain. They’re looking forward to life while considering the amazing path they took to get here.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: What’s happened since the movie? What’s life been like since credits roll on “West of Memphis”?

DAMIEN ECHOLS: It’s been almost non-stop writing. I’ve been out about a year and three months. I went to New Zealand for three months to work on the documentary over there. We spent two months on the road to promote the book and now we’re promoting the documentary. It’s been a LOT of travel. We stayed in New York for most of the past year. We just moved to Massachusetts like two months ago and we finally got our own house. So, we get a day off here and there and we go and try to hang curtains or something.

LORRI DAVIS: A big part of it, also, is we tend to forget because we’re so busy and it’s day-to-day, but a HUGE part is just the transition, mentally and physically, for him. We didn’t know what to expect and there’s no guidebook for these things. So much has transpired in that realm in the past year.



West of Memphis

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Is there a part of you that worries about a year from now when there’s no movie and no book?

ECHOLS: I’m so looking forward to that I can’t even express it — to get into things that aren’t case-related. I’m going to have my first art show in New York. I’m really looking forward to that. I’m looking forward to settling down and establishing routine again. Physical exercise. In

the long term, I want to have a small meditation center in Salem where I can pass along the things that I learned in prison that helped me get through hard times. I want to pass that on to people who will appreciate it or want to apply it to their own lives in some sort of way. Something that’s completely unrelated to the case.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Unrelated but it’s the case that got you there. Do either of you ever allow yourselves to think about where you’d be without “the case”? Would you still be in Memphis?

ECHOLS: It’s impossible to imagine. There’s no way to know. Ever since I was a kid, I would think, “Surely, there has to be something better than this, somewhere. There’s got to be something more magical, more meaningful, something that doesn’t seem like a pointless existence.” I would like to think that I would have gotten out of there in some sort of way.



West of Memphis
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: What about you? What if “Paradise Lost” never got made?

DAVIS: My life took a complete turn. I was living this life with my career in New York and I loved what I did but it’s hard to convey because of how hard it was — the whole time working on the case. At the same time, it was the most fulfilling and amazing thing. And the fact that we got him out.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: How do you deal with emotions like anger and vengeance and things that most people would feel in your case?

ECHOLS: In prison, it was the meditation. You’ve got to choose things in your daily life to focus on. Out here, a lot of it is how much there is to enjoy. The world is an amazing place. There’s just so much I’d rather be seeing and doing and talking about and experiencing other than looking back at what happened in Arkansas twenty years ago.

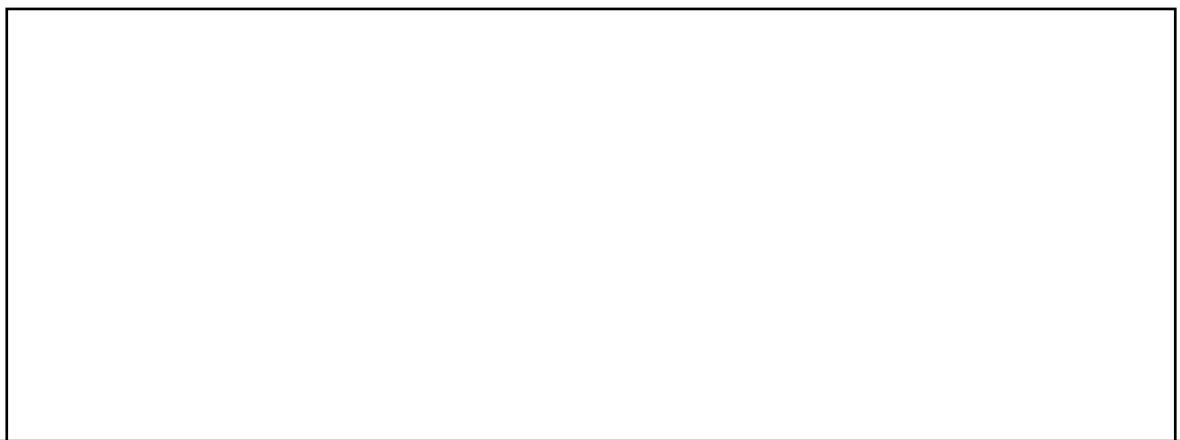
HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: But it’s not just twenty years ago. When the prosecutor says in the movie, “Well, they pleaded guilty,” I want to stand up and scream. How do you deal with that emotion or do you just let it go?

ECHOLS: You have to. A lot of it too is once you’ve been subjected to so many monstrously huge horrors in life that when you come across a little one it’s kind of like a spitball. It doesn’t have the impact of people trying to murder you.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Do you ever think about the people in prison who don’t have a “Paradise Lost”? What can we do for them?

ECHOLS: Yes. It’s hard to say. A lot of people will ask a question like that but when it comes down to it, most people are not going to dedicate what it’s going to require. It’s fine to sit around and have a philosophical conversation but when it’s actually time to put the work in — when it’s time to fight, fuck, or go for your guns, most people aren’t going to stick with it.

DAVIS: It takes too long. That’s what we need to change. If we could just cut out all of the ridiculousness in our justice system. That’s another thing we want to see the film do - someone who sees it who doesn’t understand the dire straits of where we are right now...maybe there’s a defense attorney or prosecutor who could see it and it could help them. That’s our hope.





West of Memphis
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Has anything changed? Is it more difficult for this situation to happen today than it was twenty years ago?

ECHOLS: No. I've always told people that our case was nothing out of the ordinary. The only thing that made us an exception was that there were cameras in the courtroom to catch it on film. That's what it all comes down to. It's harder in some places than it is in others but it still happens. People say, "If you lived in New York at the time, this wouldn't happen." And I say, "Tell that to The Central Park Five." It happens everywhere. It would be harder to convince New Yorkers that there were underground Satanists at work but it still happens.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Did you ever allow yourself to think that a day like this would never come?

ECHOLS: I was always remembered what they tell race car drivers, "Don't look at the wall." Look at the track. Look at the other drivers. You'll move in that direction. We didn't look at the wall.

DAVIS: I don't know why but I never had any doubt. I can't explain it. I worked on it every day and I just didn't think it would take so long.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Do you stay in touch with the people who have helped you through this like Peter Jackson, Eddie Vedder, Henry Rollins?

ECHOLS: Yeah, all the time. On the book tour, I did a talk at the New York Public Library and Henry Rollins did it with me. He was on stage. Peter, we spent three months with him. We're getting ready to go see him again. Peter and Fran have become like family to us. Johnny [Depp] has become like a brother to me. He comes from the same background that I did. Anytime we get together it's nothing serious. It's just dumb-ass-ery and fun. We end up watching "Honey Boo Boo" or going to the tattoo parlor. It's always relaxing, comforting, and fun. You don't have to think about anything serious or case-related.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Do you have a mental checklist of things like that that you've always wanted to do and now can being free? I want to go see and do X, Y, and Z?

ECHOLS: I had a list of things when I was in prison and I've actually done ALL of 'em. I can't even remember what most of them were. But it's been amazing. I wanted to go see a Boston Red Sox game and not only did we get to go see the game but Eddie Vedder hooked it up and we got to sit in the owner's box, meet the team, etc. I was going to ask Jonathan Papelbon to sign a baseball and he went and got a game-worn jersey and gave it to me. Moving to Salem, that was another. Everything that I wanted to do in prison I've now done. So it's time to make up a new list.



West of Memphis
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Do you ever allow for wondering what might have been if you had done something a little differently? If you had taken a different approach ten years ago it might not have taken another ten to get out?

DAVIS: It can drive me crazy because there were mistakes made and there were people working on the case who had I known they were a psychopath I wouldn't have gotten them involved but we didn't know. There are psychopaths working everywhere and it just so happens a lot of them are lawyers. (Laughs.)

ECHOLS: When you have to fight against the other lawyers as hard or harder as you do against the state. Jason [Baldwin]'s lawyers. Their entire agenda was to make me look as guilty as possible, thinking somehow it was going to help him. The number one thing that people quote is Exhibit 500, a mental health report, that comes from the fact that, one day, Jason's attorneys contacted me and said they had this idea that would be really helpful and great. I was naive. It was years ago. OK, sure, let's do it. This woman comes and writes up this report that diagnoses me with every single mental illness known to mankind. She can't even file it herself because she's already perjured herself and so she takes it to another doctor to file. The number one piece of evidence that people use to try and hurt me wasn't even filed by the state. It was filed by Jason Baldwin's attorneys.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: You're fighting people who you think should be on your side.

DAVIS: At the end of the day, when you have a multiple defendant case, that usually happens. It got really dicey at the end with Jason. Once he said OK to the Alford Plea, we just plowed through. His attorneys were still fighting that...

ECHOLS: They were telling him "No, fight it, stay in prison," until they heard, "You're not getting any more money. You've gotten every fucking penny you're going to get."

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: They were trying to milk the defense fund?

ECHOLS: "Take the deal, take the deal."

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: So gross. See that's the kind of stuff that makes me angry. I need to meditate.

ECHOLS: Lorri was the one raising money for all of us. She's not married to Jason or Jesse. She's doing the fundraising for all three of us.

DAVIS: We tried to explain that Damien's case was going to move quicker. It's just another one of those things that you're going to have people along the way who may be trying or meddlesome. Yeah, there were mistakes made and sometimes none of us knew what we were doing but I don't think it could have gone any quicker.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: How is Damien different than you expected outside of prison?

DAVIS: I expected that same man to walk out of prison and it wasn't fair because Damien had done such a good job of protecting himself. There's no way. The fact is that he didn't let anyone see how much he was suffering when he first got out. I expected him to be able to go to the bank. All these things. The six months after he got out, he finally let me know he was suffering and it was a whole new beginning.

ECHOLS: The way I was in prison, I didn't get in one day. It was years. It's going to take a lot of work.

DAVIS: The essence of Damien is the same and always will be the same. Amazing. Wonderful. But no one knew. You just don't understand. We were all moving so fast that no one stopped to realize.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: You said in Interview Magazine that you think you would have met Lorri no matter what had happened. You believe in that kind of fate?

ECHOLS: Sometimes. I don’t think every single aspect of our lives is predestined or preordained down to the smallest comma and period. Sometimes I think there are things that are big enough that they find a way to happen no matter what.

“West of Memphis” opens in Chicago on January 18, 2013.



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Source URL (retrieved on Apr 25 2024 - 10:15am):
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