

## Interview: Director Jack C. Newell on the Chicago Set for 'Open Tables'

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CHICAGO – You know you're on a Jack C. Newell film set when his producer, Steve Tobiasz, offers you the best empanada you've ever eaten, from the Gourmet Food Truck that is crucial to the upcoming scene. "Open Tables" is director Jack C. Newell's second feature film, coming in right after 2012's "Close Quarters."

The shot-in-Chicago movies are provocative in Newell's style of direction. They both feature top Chicago improvisation talent – including T.J. Jagodowski, Dave Pasquesi, Susan Messing and in "Open Tables," Joel Murray – and they both use the style of interpretive improv rather than a fixed dialogue script. Newell began his film career in 2004 with his directorial short film debut, "When Sara Looks Up," and made TV movies and six other shorts before completing "Close Quarters" in 2012.



On Set with Director Jack C. Newell (right) for 'Open Tables'  
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Newell runs an impressively loose but professional set. On the last day of principal photography in Chicago, HollywoodChicago.com caught up with Newell on location at the corner of 18th Street and Newberry Avenue. Besides sampling the tasty empanada, I watched a fairly complex shot of actors talking in front of a food truck and moving past an art gallery with a show taking place inside. Several takes of the scene went off without a hitch, and the movement of principle actors and background extras were flawlessly organized. HollywoodChicago.com talked to Jack Newell about "Open Tables" a few days after that stellar night.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Your last film, 'Close Quarters,' was a loose improvisational style film. The title 'Open Tables' seems to imply an opposition to that style. What is different in this film and what makes your approach different as a director?

**Jack C. Newell:** Part of the idea with coming up with the title was that for me 'Close Quarters' – while I like the film and I'm happy with it –

got a bit stagnated. it was just one spot and one location for an hour and a half. We did a lot to solve that problem and address it, but 'Open Tables' is about pushing myself and challenging myself.

I could have made another film that was in one location, I will probably try it again, but I wanted to try to take the same process of filmmaking – with the use of improvisation seen in 'Close Quarters' – and apply it in a more complex and traditional type of film shoot. The idea is that I was opening it up, so how about 'Open Tables.'

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How is the improvisation style in 'Open Tables' different than what you practiced in 'Close Quarters'?



Newell Instructs Extra Rebecca Fons for 'Open Tables'  
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**Newell:** There are two improvisation styles at work in 'Open Tables.' The first half of the film is an improv process called 'The Dinner Party.' One side of the stage is persons sharing stories, much as is done at a dinner party. Scenes are pulled up by those stories, as in 'remember when we went to Great America?' Then they edit and you actually experience the scene.

The second half of the film is called a 'La Ronde' [named for a 1950 film directed by Max Ophüls]. It involves two people in a scene together, and then one person leaves and a new person comes in. Then the other person leaves and a another new person comes in, they are in essence switching partners. That creates a flow between one scene and another, and maintains a narrative thread. It's taking what I learned in doing 'Close Quarters' and taking it to a deeper level.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You are working with many of the performers from 'Close Quarters.' What was exciting to you in bringing some of these actors to the roles you had written for them?

**Newell:** Part of it was getting to know them better. For 'Close Quarters,' they came in on the day of shooting, we didn't let them read the script ahead of time or let them know about their characters. They showed up – and with a huge leap of faith – just did it. For example, T.J. Jagodowski, I just got to know him in the time he worked on 'Close Quarters,' about three hours. So it was fun in 'Open Tables' to get to know him and the other actors that much better.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You are acting in this film, but are not listed on the credits. What is your character and how does it integrate within the concept of the film?

**Newell:** If I'm going to be reductionist regarding the film, it is a romantic comedy. Does Ryan, who is my character, and Cassie – portrayed by Caroline Neff – will they get together? It's a sneaky plot point, you can watch the first half of the film and not guess that will happen. Through the chance encounters as the film unfolds, it becomes more specific. I haven't put my name in the credits yet [note: the credit is on IMDB.com now] because Steven Soderbergh said the more times you list your name. the less weight it has. [laughs] It seems like every independent film is written-produced-directed-starring these days.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** They say that directors learn something new on every set they manage. What have you learned so far on 'Open

Tables' and how will you apply that knowledge going forward?

**Newell:** You kind of relearn lessons in a new way. In this one, I learned again how important the script is, even though our script is loose, it's still important to tell the story. Also the importance of getting everyone on board and on the same page, that definitely happened for 'Open Tables.'

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Counter to the usual guerilla techniques of shooting a micro-budget film in a short period of time, you've chosen a longer shooting schedule. What is the advantage to this?

**Newell:** It's was really by design, to shoot it slowly. Without much money, I wanted time on my side, to get the right locations, talent and shooting gear to adjust to various schedules. A lot of what is expensive on a film is what is needed right now. It's like a wedding, flowers aren't that expensive, but you need to know they'll be there on the day and that they are perfect. It's the same for film.

The process in doing this, I believe, has impact on the outcome. So if you try to do 14 hour per day schedules for 12 days in a row, there is more of a likelihood that it will show up in the finished result. It's conceivable you can make a good film, but it does put a lot of pressure on a shoot.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Given the uptick of technology, with lighter digital cameras producing screenable quality, what obvious advantages are there and what is the backlash to it, given that you have evolved up through to this technology?

**Newell:** We wouldn't be making this film if it wasn't for the current access to this technology, I'm fairly confident in saying that. I'd love to do other formats in digital, but for this shoot I went with a more cost effective three camera technique, using the Canon 5D. We approach the camera as if it's a film camera, and the set is run like a film set. As far as the backlash, it's pop culture in general, in which everyone thinks they're a filmmaker. I don't know if there is an end to that. [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You are an instructor in directing at Columbia College in Chicago. In your experience, what traits cannot be taught to someone aspiring to be a director?



Close Up with Jack C. Newell for 'Open Tables'  
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**Newell:** I feel like to a certain extent that everything I do I can't teach. And I mean that in a way that everything we teach, I don't do. But I guess you have to learn those basics to find your own way. The film school starts you down that road.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** One of your earlier short films is called 'Typing,' an exploration into the heyday of the studio system in the 1940s. What do you observe to be the advantage of that era, and why – besides the obvious competition and money – was that system not able to sustain itself?

**Newell:** That type of system is more evident in television. And the weird thing is that what is coming up in cinema is mirroring the current TV boom. For example, 'The Avengers' from last year isn't that cinematic – in my opinion – it expresses itself more like television.

What was great about the old system is in the definition of auteur. Back then, every John Ford film – even though he had the same crew, same type of actors – why does it feel different than the last one before or the one after? Why is he finding something different to pull out? That’s what I find interesting about those old movies.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What kind of research did you do for ‘Typing’?

**Newell:** Before I started making the film, I had to watch those movies in the era. Like many people, I was turned off by so-called ‘black & white’ movies. I had to watch every Robert Montgomery film, because they make fun of him in ‘Typing.’ [laughs] So I watched all of those movies, and that opened the door to Charlie Chaplin, who became a huge influence on me.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You are a practitioner of one of the latest movie buzz terms, the ‘micro budget’ technique of filmmaking. Are you of the school that theoretically, more great movies would be made if 100 people were given a million bucks apiece to make a film, as opposed to one 100 million picture?

**Newell:** Easily.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Would five movies be better? Ten? I’m talking more critical/audience acceptance rather than box office...

**Newell:** I’m thinking up to 50% would be better, with the right one hundred filmmakers. But even the concept of ‘independent’ budgets have changed. What is touted at Sundance may have Steve Carell in it, and may cost 20 million. That’s not independent to me.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What shot or structures do you sneak into your productions that are a homage to your favorite directors?

**Newell:** For ‘Close Quarters,’ I was attempting a ‘City Lights’ [Charlie Chaplin film] kind of ending, with a shared moment ending. There is a bit of ‘Big Night’ [directed by Stanley Tucci and Campbell Scott] towards the end with the making of the eggs and a general wide shot. In ‘Open Tables,’ I was into symmetry, which is a Stanley Kubrick thing.

I did a lot of repetition in the film as well, which was a minimalist idea, like modern composers Philip Glass or variations on themes and cycles. I’m really fascinated with modernist ideas based on mass replication. Using that to communicate the culture that we live in, captivates me. I find those cycles very interesting.

*“Open Tables” is still in production. Featuring Joel Murray, Susan Messing, T.J. Jagodowski, Dave Pasquesi, Caroline Neff and Jack C. Newell. Written and directed by Jack C. Newell. Not yet rated.*



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