

Interviews: City, State Filmmakers on Their Short Films at Chicago International Film Festival

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- [2013](#) [2]
- [49th](#) [3]
- [AB Negative](#) [4]
- [Chicago International Film Festival](#) [5]
- [City & State](#) [6]
- [Daniel Klein](#) [7]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [8]
- [How to Abandon Ship](#) [9]
- [Interview](#) [10]
- [KOFN](#) [11]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [12]
- [Penny Bartlett](#) [13]
- [Robin McKay](#) [14]
- [Shawn Spear](#) [15]
- [Short Films](#) [16]

CHICAGO – One of the great nights of the Chicago International Film Festival every year is the City & State “Local Heroes” Short Film program, as local filmmakers from Chicago and the State of Illinois present their work. Directors Shawn Spear (“KOFN”), Daniel Klein (“AB Negative”) and Robin McKay (“How to Abandon Ship”) spoke to HollywoodChicago.com after their screenings on October 15th, 2013.



Shawn Spear, Director of “KOFN”

“KOFN,” pronounced “coffin,” is a perfectly antediluvian vision of man and machine, created with a mix of stop action dolls and mind-blowing animation.

HollywoodChicago.com: With ‘KOFN’ and its viewpoint, were you trying to express something specific about our current society or what we’re facing in the future?



Shawn Spear in Chicago on October 15th, 2013
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Shawn Spear: I wasn’t trying to address any current issues, like the NSA privacy issues or healthcare. I could see why people would think that, after viewing my film, but basically I was making a film that evoked a creepy dystopian feeling. That’s the type of feeling I get when I watch certain films.

HollywoodChicago.com: The film expresses a detachment that is becoming more and more prevalent as technology increasingly enters our lives. Are we destined to become more disassociated victims of this technology?

Spear: It’s becoming like that now, it’s much easier to check in on your friends with a computer monitor or phone, instead of actually spending face-to-face time with them. It’s convenient, but it does create a detachment and a wedge between you and significant human relationships.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you talk about your love for filmmaking, and making films like yours, what do you talk about primarily?

Spear: For this particular film, there wasn't a time when I wasn't in love with it. I loved building the sets, creating the characters, setting up the shots, filming it, doing the animation and I especially loved cutting it all together and adding the sound effects, because that to me is when the project comes to life. When I'm doing this process, time flies by, I forget to eat and I'll work for long hours, forgetting everything else I need to do. A popular sports term is being 'in the zone,' so I know what that means in my filmmaking work, that fixation and absorption, I just love it.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is next for you?

Spear: I'm working on a short film, similar to "KOFN" – it's another dystopian landscape – but it's about a guy going to lunch. It starts off comedic, but takes a nosedive from there, into disturbing. It should be a lot of fun. [laughs]



Daniel Klein, Director of "AB Negative"

The title is actually "AB –," but the sign refers to the blood type. A couple gets into a car accident, and an ambulance pulls up. But something is just not right...

HollywoodChicago.com: What are the roots of the fear that is perpetuated in your film?



Daniel Klein in Chicago on October 15th, 2013

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Daniel Klein: I noticed that when I would see an accident, the ambulances that arrived shortly thereafter seemed to come out of nowhere, and nobody seems to know who called them. When they come, they look different from one another – they could be from a hospital or the city or a private company. One of the alarming elements was one of these ambulances was kind of grimy and a little weird. So I thought hypothetically what if one of the first responders on the scene, but were not associated with a city or hospital, how would that story go?

HollywoodChicago.com: Much is left as a mystery in this film. How important as a filmmaker is it to define what isn't on screen as much as what is?

Klein: To me, the unseen moments suggest a larger universe that the story exists in, that creates a deeper context. I admire short films with a beginning, middle and an end, but I never wanted to tell that type of story. My aspiration is invite people into a environment, a tone, a tenor and a premise – and that has them asking questions. I made this short with a feature film in mind, it's the first seven or eight minutes of that film. I like the world that this film exists in, and I like the people that inhabit that world.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the most personal element of yourself that we find in your film?

Klein: Anybody who knows me probably would think, 'why would Klein make that film?' I was with a number of producers, and they started coming up with horror film ideas. I thought all the ideas had been played out. After they asked me to come up with something, I protested I didn't like the genre that much. Then someone said, 'yeah, but you're riddled with fears.' It was a fair statement, because I have so many ridiculous fears. I ended up telling this story. And of course, now I have a fear of ambulances. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: What type, style or genre of film inspires you, and how does it teach you as a filmmaker?

Klein: I find that I love great movies, and it doesn't matter what the genre is. I realized that about myself only recently. For example, when I saw the original "Texas Chain Saw Massacre" when I younger, I was scared out of my mind. When I watched it as an adult, I became fascinated by its simple story, so well told. Even though it's categorized as a "horror" film, it's actually a great film. So if you ask me what my favorite movies are, I jump from genre to genre, focusing on the pinnacle in each one.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you talk about your love for filmmaking, what do you talk about primarily?

Klein: I love to feel transported. When I watch a great film, I forget about everything else. All the rules and the problems of the day-to-day are gone, all I'm thinking about is where I am in this story. Being transported, taken away from the banality of the everyday, I'm indebted to

filmmakers who pull that off. It's medicinal.



Robin McKay, Director of "How to Abandon Ship"

This partial puppetry, stop motion and animated epic is a remarkably mature and honest reflection of relationship issues and woes.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the genesis of this film, was it from observation or personal experience?



Robin McKay in Chicago on October 15th, 2013

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Robin McKay: It's not primarily experience. I'm sure it stems from terrible relationships, although my parents are perfectly happy. Everyone who sees the film assumes that I come from a broken home or have witnessed bad marriages. I don't know where it specifically came from, it was just stream of consciousness writing.

HollywoodChicago.com: You spoke of a "stemming" in bad relationships in that answer. Where you lashing out against something in that realm?

McKay: I always seem to write from a man's perspective, it always comes out as a man in a bad relationship, with a magical realistic transformation. It's always something like that, and I don't know why. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: How did you arrive on the unique visual elements in the film – the mix of puppetry and animation?

McKay: It was a lot of trial and error. I started with stop motion, but it didn't feel completely right. Then it went into 2D computer animation, but that wasn't working. I then thought it would make a good comic book, but that also didn't feel right. It wasn't until I found this hybrid of puppets, live action and animation that seemed like an easy option at the time. So I just went for it.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the most personal element of yourself that we find in your film?

McKay: When I write, it's all about the "line" that occurs to me. I will have it in my studio, on a board, and I make connections to form the story. So when I recognize that line that I thought of on the train in the finished product, that is the personal moment when I say, 'oh.'

HollywoodChicago.com: When you talk about your love for filmmaking, what do you talk about primarily?

McKay: I got into filmmaking my Senior Year of undergraduate, so going right into graduate school made the subject new for me. I want to tell stories, and I saw animation as a convenient, although labor intensive, vehicle for that. It's about making the story I see in my head.

HollywoodChicago.com: When family members see your film, is there reaction, 'yes, this is Robin' or do they not recognize you in the finished product?

McKay: Well, members of my family are usually a little weirded out. [laughs] Friends and roommates tend to say, 'yeah, definitely your style.' My parents aren't really into film. My Mom called me and said, 'I watched it on my phone, it looked really good.' I thought, oh my god, on your phone? My Dad's a native Scotsman, he was in the DEA, all animation for him is for babies, that's what babies understand.

HollywoodChicago.com: Which screenplay, in the history of cinema, would you have wanted to direct and why?

McKay: Maybe 'Annie Hall.' It suits my interests. I think I could relate to that. [laughs]

The City & State "Local Heroes" Short Film Program will repeat at the Chicago International Film Festival on Friday, October 18th and Sunday, October 20th. The 49th Chicago International Film Festival is October 10th-24th, 2013. For more information and to purchase tickets, click on ChicagoFilmFestival.com [17]



[18]

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- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/49th>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/ab-negative>
- [5] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/chicago_international_film_festival.html
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/city-state>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/daniel-klein>
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- [14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/robin-mckay>
- [15] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/shawn-spear>
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