

Interview: Director Richard Linklater Kept Going Back to 'Boyhood'

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CHICAGO – Director Richard Linklater is a great American storyteller. In 2002, he embarked on a filmmaking journey that would be twelve years long, and conceived a fictional tale of a boy as he ages from age six to 18. Using the same actors over all those years, the result is the epic and philosophical “Boyhood.”

The power of “Boyhood” is embraced by the boy’s life cycle – portrayed by Ellar Coltrane through the ages. The ups and downs of his short but eventful existence is experienced as he grows during the 12 years. The basis for his perspective is forged through the difficulties of his estranged parents, two stepfathers and his mother’s dogged determination to keep everything together for him and his sister (portrayed by Richard Linklater’s daughter, Lorelei). Patricia Arquette (Mom) and the venerable Linklater collaborator Ethan Hawke (Dad) are around for the whole ride, and there is a poignancy to knowing them both as “movie stars” and people who go through the normal aging process as the film progresses. “Boyhood” is a extraordinary film for many reasons.



Ethan Hawke (left) and director Richard Linklater for 'Boyhood'

Photo credit: Universal Pictures

Richard Stuart Linklater was born in Houston, Texas, and made a circuitous route toward his profession. He dropped out of Sam Houston College in the early 1980s, and worked on an oil rig while developing a love for film and film making. He moved to Austin, Texas, enrolled in a local community college to study his craft, and started a film society there in 1985. After making several short films and an 8mm feature, he

broke through in 1991 with “Slacker,” a day-in-the-life of Austin and their eccentric citizens.

Two years later, the brilliantly nostalgic “Dazed and Confused” introduced several name actors to the world, including Matthew McConaughey, Ben Affleck, Milla Jovovich, Adam Goldberg, Parker Posey, Joey Lauren Adams and Renée Zellweger. In 1995, he began the “Before” Trilogy (“Before Sunrise,” “Before Sunset,” “Before Midnight”) with Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy. His more mainstream fare includes “School of Rock” (2004), “Me and Orson Welles” (2008) and the wild ride of “Bernie” (2011).

HollywoodChicago.com sat in for a roundtable interview – the other journalist inquiries will be designated by “Question” – with Richard Linklater on behalf of his amazing 12 year trip with “Boyhood,” and a career that encompasses the depth and purpose of the American experience.

HollywoodChicago.com: Alcohol abuse plays a role in your film. What was behind your editorial decision to make the ‘boy’ a substance user as he becomes a teenager, even though he had witnessed the horrors of what alcohol had done to the relationships over the years?

Richard Linklater: We really only see him take a sip of beer.

HollywoodChicago.com: At one point he ingests a mushroom...

Linklater: It’s a pot brownie. Peer pressure, you know, [laughs]. He doesn’t look like any more than a casual social user, like a lot of kids. I was trying to capture the view of alcoholism from a kid’s point of view. You see them as they think, ‘Why is this erratic behavior going on?’ It’s not until years later that they’ll realize it’s a drinking problem, this unpredictable, random thing in life called self-medication. It can be fraught with danger.

QUESTION: Timelines are fascinating in your films. You like to do the one day scenarios, or in the ‘Before Trilogy,’ the updating of a couple over 18 years. ‘Boyhood’ seems to be the ultimate expression of the timeline. What in cinematic terms interests you about the passage of time, especially in the case of this film?

Linklater: It was the only way to tell this particular story in the way I wanted to tell it, but I can see where it goes down in the books as a time exploration. I was really trying to create a reality as to how it ‘feels’ to go through time in that way, to grow up and mature in that time. In the other films I’m also trying to do that, create a reality for the viewer that feels real. That is what the challenge was ... for a viewer to take in 12 years and still feel that it’s realistic. It was about the tone. Really, it does changed my average timeline now ... it works out now to be a little longer for all of them. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: One of the unsung heroes in the film is Patricia Arquette’s Mom character, who arguably advances the most in her career and admirably keeping the family fed, and then ends up almost frustratingly alone. What statement what you making with her sacrifice?

Linklater: People see that character differently, and even in subsequent viewings they see that the film could be called ‘Motherhood.’ It’s the depiction of a very complex and real portrait of a woman just dealing with what life throws at her, and doing her best. Ultimately, I think she is a strong and great woman, but like everyone has to go through a bit of hell in the process. Where you are at the end is not necessarily where you’d thought you’d be. Life just happens that way. She does have that moment when she feels bereft, and I think she earned it. She’ll probably be all right.

QUESTION: You began this project in 2002, did you have an idea of how the story would go, or was it all figured out along the way?

Linklater: No, I had it fairly planned out, it wasn’t random at all. I’m a big structure and architecture guy. I knew what the last shot of the film would be at about year two. Patricia remembered me telling her the whole character, that she was going to get educated and get divorced along the way. It was all structured, but the fun of it was it gave me the opportunity to think – shoot, edit and then think. [laughs] In comparison to making a film in a short amount of time, it was different. I used the time element to our advantage, to just let the film speak to me as to what it wanted to be. Also, as the actors aged, I got to see where they were going.

There was nothing significantly different than what I envisioned initially, but yet I knew I would be adjusting every year. It’s like life, we all have a plan, and once we get there we can look back and remember how we got to that point. But you can’t predict exactly 12 years before that you would be here for this reason. Everything in the film has a life corollary – on one hand, unpredictable, and on the other, expected.



Richard Linklater Standing on the Set of ‘Dazed and Confused’ (1993)

Photo credit: Universal Studios Home Entertainment

HollywoodChicago.com: I read online that your daughter lost interest in her role and literally wanted to be killed off ...

Linklater: [Laughs] She never said it in those words, it was more like ‘Can my character just die?’ Die is different than being killed off. It was a fleeting thing with her, probably as much as a father/daughter dynamic than anything else. But she worked really hard, and is great in the film.

HollywoodChicago.com: As her Dad and the artist behind the film, what did you have to do to convince her that she had to continue for the good of the art?

Linklater: It became about the good of herself. She enjoyed doing it, and it meant different things at different times for her. But here orientation towards it was a bit different than Ellar’s [the ‘boy’]. It wasn’t his life. Lorelei grew up on movie sets. It wasn’t a big deal for her to be making a movie over the years, it just wasn’t. It was a part of our lives and a fun thing to be doing together.

At some point she was asking me, ‘Hey, are we shooting this summer?’ I think she realized she was getting paid. [laughs] Let’s see, she could work in the sandwich shop or do babysitting, or eat craft services, fart around for a week, and make more money with the SAG minimum than any of those other jobs.

QUESTION: This was a unique casting situation. We know mostly how some actors will look in 12 weeks during a typical shooting session, but having to figure out how someone will look in 12 years – whether they would continue to be watchable – had to be major challenge. What was it about Ellar Coltrane that made him the right choice?

Linklater: It was a huge decision and a huge moment for this production. We played our instincts, and he was a ethereal and interesting kid. At the same time in this situation as well, we were ‘casting’ the parents, and he had parents who supported him and were artists themselves. They made it a positive thing in his life and nurtured them.

The film also nurtured Ellar Coltrane as well, he talks about his friendships and how we became a family. Most movie sets say that, but 12 years later we actually were a family. I got lucky for sure.

HollywoodChicago.com: One the most remarkable things about a truly remarkable film, ‘Dazed and Confused,’ is how similar your high school experience was to mine, even though we were thousands of miles away. What was it about 1970s America that you think contributed to the homogenization from one location to another?

Linklater: I think by the 1970s we had become one culture, and television – even though it only had three or four stations, made us media savvy. It was one culture in a good way and a commercial way, as local radio gave in to Top 40, so we were all listening to the same songs.

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you think it still exists today? Could you make a ‘Dazed and Confused’ with a Class of 2014?

Linklater: I think so, yes. There is something eternal about just being that age – the high school, the way you socialize, the way you rebel, the way you bond and the way you look for something to do. As far as the limitations and the exuberance, I think some things never change. It’s the same thing in ‘Boyhood.’ It’s set in Texas pretty much, but it’s a universal story. Who doesn’t have a family, siblings and schools? We all grow up with a lot of common stuff.

QUESTION: You did nine films while you were doing ‘Boyhood.’ Did your journey with ‘Boyhood’ influence the other films, or did the other films have an effect on ‘Boyhood’?

Linklater: I think ‘Boyhood’ influenced the other films more than the reverse. It had its tone, it was the movie I was going to make and the feel of it was set. And because Ethan [Hawke] and I had committed to do this 12 year life project, it gave us the courage to do ‘Before Sunset’ [middle film of ‘Before’ trilogy], which we did the year after we started this. But I definitely didn’t want to ‘evolve’ just within the boundaries of this film, and the others I did want to be different.

QUESTION: You shot this film in a 35mm format, and so much has changed with how movies are actually filmed. Did you anticipate the changes in those formats when you began ‘Boyhood’ 12 years ago?



D&C Lives! Richard Linklater in Chicago, July 15, 2014

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Linklater: Two of my last films have been shot on film. This one, and ‘Me and Orson Welles.’ It’s a choice, I don’t obsess about it that much. When I started ‘Boyhood,’ there were no choices, it was 35mm. I needed a stable negative in order to eventually finish the film. The real threat came from the outside, ‘Well, there might not even be film when we’re done.’ I knew there would be. It has become rarer, but every film gauge [8mm, 16mm, etc.] is still available.

So through the process of shooting this, we did witness the slow death spiral of film, but we made it through. It became the best of both worlds – we shot on film but we were also able to take advantage of all the goodies the digital post production had to offer. It’s convenient, and it helped.

HollywoodChicago.com: At one point your characters in ‘Boyhood’ gaze onto an Austin that is decidedly different than the one your characters walked through in ‘Slacker.’ Do you think your film had anything to do with the explosive growth of the town, especially in the aspect it being the hippest place in Texas?

Linklater: [Laughs] Yeah, there was an article in which I was named one of the people that helped ruin Austin. Right now, there are these t-shirts that say, ‘Austin, Population: Full.’ It’s too late. [laughs] I don’t know what to say.

I like to think when you are 17 years old, it’s always your time. You don’t know what Austin looked like in 1990. It’s all about them – a parking garage can have it’s own romance.

HollywoodChicago.com: Aside from that context, it looked like dusty town in ‘Slacker’...

Linklater: It was, Austin was in a depression at that point because the oil boom had busted, and rents were cheap. It was a different place.

“Boyhood” continues its limited release in Chicago on July 18th. Featuring Ellar Coltrane, Patricia Arquette, Ethan Hawke, Lorelei Linklater, Marco Perella. Written and directed by Richard Linklater. Rated “R.” Thanks to Peter Sobczynski.



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