

Interview: Director Bennett Miller is the Hound in ‘Foxcatcher’

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- [Anthony Michael Hall](#) [2]
- [Bennett Miller](#) [3]
- [Brad Pitt](#) [4]
- [Capote](#) [5]
- [Channing Tatum](#) [6]
- [Foxcatcher](#) [7]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [8]
- [Interview](#) [9]
- [John du Pont](#) [10]
- [Mark Ruffalo](#) [11]
- [Moneyball](#) [12]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [13]
- [Philip Seymour Hoffman](#) [14]
- [Sienna Miller](#) [15]
- [Sony Pictures Classics](#) [16]
- [Steve Carell](#) [17]
- [Vanessa Redgrave](#) [18]

CHICAGO – There are many categories of film director types – facilitators, tacticians, framers, to name a few – but there are few real artists. Bennett Miller has guided three films in his career, “Capote,” “Moneyball” and his latest “Foxcatcher.” All three have a purposeful artistry, and explore the soul within the humanity it portrays.

Having brought on that analysis, Bennett Miller is also a pragmatist, who can’t reconcile some of the interpretations involved in the following interview – which also sets him uniquely apart. He was born in New York City, and in his youth knew both writer Dan Futterman – who fashioned the story for “Foxcatcher” – and the late actor Philip Seymour Hoffman, who magnificently portrayed Truman Capote in Miller’s 2005 directorial debut, “Capote.” Miller next took on the complex “Moneyball,” and made it into a baseball movie that communicated more about the game than past films that dealt directly with the sport. With “Foxcatcher,” he goes back into the sports world, but with a background about the American Dream and the differing elements within it.



Channing Tatum and Steve Carell in ‘Foxcatcher’

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

Steve Carell portrays John du Pont, the scion of a wealthy family lineage, one of the most prominent in American history. John du Pont sought more from his life, and in the late 1980s sponsored the U.S. Olympic wrestling team, which included two top performing brothers, Mark (Channing Tatum) and Dave (Mark Ruffalo) Schultz. The somewhat incongruous story, like the eccentricities of “Moneyball” and “Capote,” speaks to larger themes about the characters, and are not conclusive. “Foxcatcher” won the Best Director for Miller at the most recent Cannes Film Festival.

HollywoodChicago.com wrestled rhetorically with Bennett Miller, as the artist spoke truth to the promotional Q&A format.

HollywoodChicago.com: This was such a bizarre American story, full of contradictions and lost souls. What do you think is the most American of emotions in the story, based on how this country is structured and how the citizens respond to it's so-called American Dream?

Bennett Miller: Holy cow, I just woke up from a nap! I think within your question is one of the most American things, and that is to measure something against something else. What is the most? Let's race them. Who wins? The question encapsulates everything I wanted to say about the story.

Somebody once told me that people who do not grow up with fathers have two dominate qualities. One is the belief that everything is possible and the other is a perpetual insecurity. I feel that those are two very American qualities. We got rid of our father, the king, when we were founded – we eviscerated that authority. So as a result, we are all on the same playing field. The fundamental belief that anything is possible, with great ambition and hope. But also it comes with a great anxiety, and your station in life is determined by your talent, abilities and efforts. It's your entitlement, if you deserve it, but there is always a station above you.

HollywoodChicago.com: You have been developing this film for close to eight years. What drew you to the story initially and how many phases of the story did you have to shift through in development until you found the right tone for the story?

Miller: Part of making films is developing this ability to communicate in this other medium. Perhaps out of necessity, because in my case, there is an inability to express yourself that well when you're sitting on a hotel couch with a mike in your face. [laughs] Having said that, what drew me in was the notion of this extremely wealthy lost soul and his absurd ambition to lead wrestlers to glory. All my films have characters in worlds where they don't belong, and this film has it in spades.

There are two characters who have grand ambitions about themselves and their destiny. They allow themselves to believe they are part of a common cause – which is another American thing. It's the ridiculousness, the comedic absurdity, of people who don't realize that they don't belong. It might have been the foundation for a great comedy if it hadn't ended tragically. That is the answer for the tone, and the way I found it was to work on the story long enough, until the tone expresses itself.



Tatum and Mark Ruffalo in 'Foxcatcher'
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

HollywoodChicago.com: So you find tone or style to be inherent?

Miller: Truman Capote said that you don't really choose what style you work in, it's innate to you, it's like the color of your eyes. This is a film that doesn't tell a story so much but observes a story. The tone and the style comes to reflect the manner in which the filmmaker themselves are exploring the thing.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your preparation for the film, what kept coming back you thematically regarding the du Pont family and their legacy? And do you believe that behind every great fortune is a great crime, and that rich families eventually, through karma, pay for those crimes?

Miller: I am not a politician. The film and I resist making conclusions, because there is the pursuit of understanding. The moment you conclude, your thought process ends, a conclusion means the end of thinking. I really don't know about these bold statements – behind every

great fortune is a great crime – is fair.

Whether it's true or not, it's a conclusion and it stops you from further understanding of the circumstance. It designates good and evil, and it allows you to take a position for or against. And that's why I think it's a political statement. The style of the film is much more unflinching and scrutinizing of something that's not easy to look at, while resisting the temptation to conclude. Just keep looking past it.

HollywoodChicago.com: It's obvious that the John du Pont character is basically looking for love within the context of 'Foxcatcher.' How do you think that desperate and necessary emotion defines each individual, both in its quest and its loss?

Miller: I think you have fully formed your opinions on all of this. I made the goddamn movie, man, and if you're able to see that in there, I say run with it. If it stimulates your opinion, I'm all for it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Well, like in 'Moneyball,' I felt it was all about the love, and how people position themselves to create a new energy within that love, by redefining it. In an age in which everyone is cynical. You're not a cynical man. You seem to be a lover, not a fighter...

Miller: In 'Moneyball,' after Oakland wins the 20th in a row, I remember Brad's character saying it doesn't mean anything, we're living in a cynical world. That's a guy who is trying to win baseball games and realizes it's about something else.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you think baseball has lost, that it can never regain, during and after the era of unrelentingly obscene salaries and performance enhancing drugs?

Miller: I loved Ken Burn's documentary about baseball. In one of episodes, one of the interviewees said, 'every so often, someone steps forward and pronounces baseball dead.' But it always comes back, and reincarnates itself into something else. That is how things evolve.

HollywoodChicago.com: You knew Philip Seymour Hoffman as a personal friend. What do you think the culture has lost with the passing of this great artist, and what parallels do you find between him and the slow decline and demise of his most famous portrayal, Truman Capote?

Miller: He was an artist. He was a truth seeker. As a personal friend, he was a truth speaker. We were brutally honest to each other in our collaborations.

In a time where relationships between creativity and money has shifted so that the power differential has tipped strongly in favor of the economic interests in the arts. The art of Phil's level requires investment, and must have that happy coincidence between those who are risking money and those who are creating. Phil was an extraordinarily uncompromising person when he came to his art, he was constitutionally incapable of bullshit. In these times, it's increasingly challenging to be unaffected and truthful in our art. That is what we lost with Phil.



Philip Seymour Hoffman (left) and Bennett Miller on the Set of 'Capote'
Photo credit: MGM/Sony Pictures Classics

HollywoodChicago.com: And the Capote parallel?

Miller: I'm going to take a pass on that one.

HollywoodChicago.com: You were quoted as saying that you are a tumbleweed, and eschew ownership in your life. At what point have you observed that possessions start to destroy people, and was that a factor in keeping your own possessions to a minimum?

Miller: People are just different. From the time I was a kid, I didn’t really have a focus on that. I don’t really have a judgement on it. I don’t want to condemn anyone or anything in any general way, because I don’t believe it. For me, personally, it’s more a matter of remaining light and agile, and not having a responsibility to those things. The possessions become a burden, and restrictive, and that’s just the Thoreau in me. But who knows? If I get right offer for the right thing from a person who has things, it might change the conversation.

HollywoodChicago.com: You began your career with a documentary, and each of your subsequent films are based on real subjects and have a sense of performed documentaries. When comparing a great and precise documentary, say on Truman Capote, to a narrative film that you captured, what are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?

Miller: I bet you could write a thesis paper on that. The problem with your questions is that each one of them could be term paper. [laughs] You could take these three films, teach a class, and each one of these questions could be a term paper assignment – and don’t forget the reading lists alongside them.

HollywoodChicago.com: [Laughs] You might have changed my life today. I appreciate your simplicity in viewpoint. So much of working in film criticism is ‘see this, see that, analyze this,’ and when you encounter someone who is just a natural artist like yourself, you just appreciate it.

Miller: Listen, part of me is like that cat wanting to hit at that dangling feather in regard to your questions. We could line up five coffees and really get into it all. They are valid and fascinating, but I can’t answer them in soundbites.

“Foxcatcher” opens everywhere on November 21st. Featuring Steve Carell, Channing Tatum, Mark Ruffalo, Sienna Miller, Vanessa Redgrave and Anthony Michael Hall. Written by E. Max Frye and Dan Futterman. Directed by Bennett Miller. Rated “R”



[19]

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