

Interview: Director Jack C. Newell Has ‘Open Tables’ at 51st Chicago International Film Festival

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on October 20, 2015 - 9:42am

- [Charlie Chaplin](#) [2]
- [Chicago](#) [3]
- [Chicago International Film Festival](#) [4]
- [Close Quarters](#) [5]
- [Courses](#) [6]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [7]
- [How to Build a School in Haiti](#) [8]
- [Interview](#) [9]
- [Jack C. Newell](#) [10]
- [Open Tables](#) [11]
- [Paris](#) [12]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [13]
- [Rebecca Fons](#) [14]
- [T.J. Jagodowski](#) [15]
- [The Second City](#) [16]
- [The Wabash Lights](#) [17]

CHICAGO – Jack C. Newell will ride his bike when he meets you for an interview in Chicago, naturally. The locally based director is a welcome original, with credits in both documentary and narrative films. His latest feature, “Open Tables,” will screen at the 51st Chicago International Film Festival on October 20th, 2015.

“Open Tables” is operating within the “Taste of Cinema” theme at the film festival, and features couples and groups meeting in restaurants, talking about their lives and relationships. Although the centerpiece is food, the meal is the conversation, including a story about a sojourn into Paris – shot in black and white. Newell directed the film in the improvisation style rooted in the Chicago comedy scene, much like his first narrative film, “Close Quarters,” which featured many local legends in the art of improv. He also takes on the leadrole as Ryan, who defines himself through the adventure in Paris. The film explores and provides perspective on the elusiveness of relationships.



Jack C. Newell in a Scene From ‘Open Tables’

Photo credit: 51st Chicago International Film Festival

Jack C. Newell is also facilitating an art project called “The Wabash Lights,” and working on two documentaries, “Courses” and “How to Build a School in Haiti.” To complete his last couple of years, he also took a position as the head of TV, Film and Digital at The Second City, and recently got married to Rebecca Fons. HollywoodChicago.com caught up to Newell in anticipation of his festival screening.

HollywoodChicago.com: One of the themes of this year’s Chicago International Film Festival is food, and your film fits that bill by focusing on conversation around restaurant tables. How do you think the medium of cinema can best capture a relationship that persons have with

food, especially in the context of ‘Open Tables’?

Jack C. Newell: What many people say about food movies is that you can’t taste what is in the film, you can only look at it, and I’ve found that interesting – it can look beautiful, but it may taste like dog shit. [laughs] ‘Open Tables’ doesn’t focus on eating, but the fellowship of bringing people together around a meal. That is one thing that the film can do well, show the relationships of people coming together, and how it affects them.

HollywoodChicago.com: You used Chicago and its neighborhoods in different ways in ‘Open Tables.’ With the emerging Chicago film industry, where do you think the character of the city resides, and how do you think it can be or is exploited in films?

Newell: I feel like in American films, New York City is a character, Chicago is a character, and the rest is Anytown, U.S.A. Chicago is interesting because it can be Chicago, or it can take on the Anytown aspect. I think we need a homegrown movement that will make Chicago an Anytown, only because once the city comes into focus I think an out-of-town audiences have trouble connecting to it. Chicago doesn’t have a distinct identity like New York City, beyond the hard working theme, and maybe crime. What is cool about Chicago is that you can make it look like a lot of different places.

HollywoodChicago.com: You work closely with The Second City style of improvisation within your films. What is an example of that technique getting tangled up on a set, and what is another example of the magic that can occur in that technique?

Newell: The magic is authenticity, I have a hard time with anything that feels remotely false. The thing I love about improvisation is the fear behind your eyes, that the moment is only happening once. In my films, people can take chances and react while listening to their fellow performers and being in the moment, which happens in good improv.

How can it get tangled? Well, people can easily go off in tangents. We avoided that in ‘Open Tables’ because we played a lot of improv games in the film, but they were all hidden. The scenes with one of the foursomes in the film – T.J. Jagodowski, Desmin Borges, Linda Orr and Colleen Doyle – were all improvised, except for a couple written scenes.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you write those, or were they outlined?

Newell: Well, one of them was just the improv game ‘Look Away,’ which I taught them on set. We’re filming and I thought I was being this genius improvisation director, and T.J. came up to me, and we started chatting. I asked him if he’d done this type of work, and he said it was a ‘First Line/Last Line’ technique [scenes are developed from first and last lines]. He picked that up instinctively, because what I had written was just a big last line.

HollywoodChicago.com: We spoke earlier of your admiration for Charlie Chaplin, and you include a Chaplin-esque sequence in Paris in ‘Open Tables.’ Where do you think the mood that Chaplin created in his greatest films appears in your film?

Newell: It’s definitely pathos, that was probably Chaplin’s greatest emotional contribution to cinema. The whole idea of the Ryan character that I play is that he is in Paris – the City of Love – and he’s miserable because he’s not in love. That is his pathos. I think most people connect to that, and it’s what I connect to.

One more pull from Chaplin in the film has its roots at the conclusion of ‘City Lights,’ that beautiful open-ended ending. I wanted ‘Open Tables’ to end in that same zone. At the beginning of the film, everything is definitive and comes to conclusions. Towards the end, there is more ambiguity, and specifically I wanted the end scene to have some questions around it.

HollywoodChicago.com: The film also gives it’s center to the Ryan character that you portray. Was there any scenes that were difficult because you had difficulties determining how you were portraying the character, or do you find it easier to include that one character that you know will set the right tone, since you’ve lived with the piece as its creator?

Newell: One easy answer was to cast good actors around me, and I really mean that. There were times in the dinner scenes that I was just grateful to be around the other cast members. I knew I could do the main character, because I felt if another person did it that they might turn it into a Woody Allen-type persona – it was close to that territory.

I knew where Ryan would work, and how to keep him in the parameter that I had conceived. The characters of Ryan and Cassie are the core of the film, and the first three quarters of the film is a treatise on why relationships don’t work, and it’s really that last scene that becomes about telling the truth, which is my philosophy on how a relationship should work. So while most of the film focuses on why relationships don’t work, we still keep trying, we want to keep trying.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was your favorite moments with Ryan?

Newell: Paris is the sequence that I’m most proud of, I think it’s the best filmmaking in the movie. It was interesting because it went opposite to how we’re told to make films. We landed in Paris on Thursday, the next two days I was casting the two French actors I worked with, Sunday we shot some scenes, and then Monday we shot all the interior scenes with the actors because it was raining. We had some pick-ups on Tuesday and Wednesday, but by Thursday we were done. It was just me and [cinematographer] Stephanie Dufford from America, and then we hired cast and crew locally, and it forced us to do the best work we could possibly do. We were definitely on the high wire without a net. I feel it was simply the best producing and directing I’ve ever done, and a great experience.



Director Jack C. Newell (center) During the Filming of 'Open Tables'

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: In the sense of 'What would Jesus do?' do you have a particular director that you evoke when stuck in a creative quandary? As in, what would _____ do? And why?

Newell: For me, it's about Steven Soderbergh, and Charlie Chaplin. Like Chaplin, I was tried to position the camera visually, to get it in the right spot and get what I wanted in the frame. But I watch a lot of films, and I'm always pulling from that education.

HollywoodChicago.com: As mentioned, you shot a sequence in Paris. One of the elements of the late 1950s French New Wave was the freedom that lighter and more agile equipment gave the look of their films. What feeling did you have as you were actually filming in Paris, as the gods of the New Wave looked over your metaphoric shoulder?

Newell: The whole black-and-white, four by three aspect ratio, is intentionally New Wave, I was trying to evoke that type of freedom. I wanted the sequence to have a perfectness about it, so when we come back to color and 16 by 9 that resolves an idea. It was absolutely intentional. The new digital technology is a 'new wave' breakthrough as well. It's cheaper and accessible, and there is more opportunity for improvisation. But it doesn't change what is important, which is the storytelling.

HollywoodChicago.com: You are also involved in 'The Wabash Lights' project, an artistic light installation underneath the elevated tracks on Wabash Avenue downtown. What are the origins of this concept, and how important is it to you to create beyond filmmaking in your life?

Newell: Before I made my first feature film, I was contemplating changing my career direction, but once I got that feature under my belt I fell in love with it all over again. But part of the other direction had to do with a class I taught at Columbia College called 'Creativity, Vision and Processes,' in which students were assigned to do a different art form outside their major concentration. If, for example, they were self identified as directors, they had to paint, dance or do poetry. There were many interesting things that came out of that class, the main thing is that people block themselves in their concentration of one art form, and doing something else frees that thought process.

The Wabash Lights Project is similar to a directing job – the logistics are management, creative vision and technical control – the lights are similar, just on a different canvas. Film has an incredible power to evoke emotion. The lights have a similar power, and it has a wider inclusivity. We wanted to be experience creators through a different type of infrastructure.

HollywoodChicago.com: You're currently working on a documentary set in Haiti. Where is the status of that project, and are you working on anything else?

Newell: The documentary is entitled 'How to Build a School in Haiti' and I've been working on it since 2011, and we're about 80% there. I have 180 hours of footage, with a 12 hour working print, and I'm going to hone that into a film that makes sense. It's a hard process, but it been my best journey and most important. It's mostly cinema vérité, with no talking heads. It does have some controversy regarding how Non-Governmental Organizations work, and it doesn't blink in the face of it.

I'm in post-production on another documentary called 'Courses,' and it's a profile of a Chicago chef named Jake Bickelhaupt. It started with me filming him running an illegal restaurant out of his house, and he has since opened 42 Grams in Uptown Chicago. It's one third artistic, one third a profile and one third about the food.

HollywoodChicago.com: One of the early nicknames for motion pictures was 'The Magic Lantern.' How does that lantern still provide a beacon of truth, and what magical properties has it personally given you as a life path?

Newell: Everybody who creates film are aiming for that truth you talk about. In the end, a film should reveal something true about the human condition. This provides for the audience an insight, and can increase empathy for the subject matter and lives presented. To gain more empathy by watching other people’s stories is ideally what I want film to do, and what I have received from it.

“Open Tables,” directed by Jack C. Newell, premieres at The 51st Chicago International Film Festival will on October 20th at 6:15pm, with repeat showings on October 24th (3:15pm) and October 27th (3pm). The Film Festival continues through October 29th, 2015, at the AMC River East 21, 322 Illinois Street, Chicago. [Click here](#) [18] for film schedules, information and to purchase tickets.



[19]

By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [20]

Writer, Editorial Coordinator

HollywoodChicago.com

pat@hollywoodchicago.com [19]

© 2015 Patrick McDonald, HollywoodChicago.com

Source URL (retrieved on Apr 18 2024 - 7:24pm):<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/25956/interview-director-jack-c-newell-has-open-tables-at-the-51st-chicago-international-film-f>**Links:**

- [1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/hankq>
- [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/charlie-chaplin>
- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/chicago>
- [4] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/chicago_international_film_festival.html
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/close-quarters>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/courses>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/hollywoodchicagodotcom-content>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/how-to-build-a-school-in-haiti>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/interview.html>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/jack-c-newell>
- [11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/open-tables>
- [12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/paris>
- [13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/patrick-mcdonald>
- [14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/rebecca-fons>
- [15] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/tj-jagodowski>
- [16] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/the-second-city>
- [17] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/the-wabash-lights>
- [18] <http://www.chicagofilmfestival.com/>
- [19] <mailto:pat@hollywoodchicago.com>
- [20] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#PAT>