

Interview: Megan Mercier, 2016 Focus Award Honoree, Presented by Women in Film Chicago

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CHICAGO – The advocacy group of Women in Film Chicago (WIFC) have an annual event that honors prominent members of the media industry in the city, and the 2016 Focus Awards Gala will take place this year on January 28th. The honorees are Advertising Creative Director Jean Batthany, Documentary Filmmaker Kathryn Hempel, Film Director Kris Swanberg, and Writer/Actor Megan Mercier.

Women in Film began in Los Angeles in the 1970s, and since then has been building a global community of film, television, advertising, digital and on screen media professionals, and is the preeminent organization for the advancement of women in these industries. The Chicago chapter of this organization is dedicated to promoting the professional and educational advancement of its members, men and women alike, while contributing to the overall success of Chicago as a provider of high-caliber commercial, television, independent and major film production.



WIFC 2016 Focus Award Honoree, Megan Mercier
Photo credit: MeganMercier.com

In anticipation of the 2016 WIFC Focus Awards, HollywoodChicago.com spoke to honoree Megan Mercier. She is an actor, writer, director and producer who began her performance career in Chicago, cutting her acting teeth doing the popular Neo-Futurists production of “Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind.” Through her work as an Artistic Director for the company, she met director Kris Swanberg. In that association, she has appeared in the films of Chicago-based director Joe Swanberg (Kris’s husband) and collaborated on the original

screenplay with Kris for the feature film “Unexpected,” which featured Cobie Smulders. Mercier currently lives in Los Angeles.

HollywoodChicago.com: You have a base in Chicago regarding your roots as a performer. What does it mean to you to receive the Women in Film Chicago Focus Award for 2016?

Megan Mercier: Creatively, I feel like Chicago is and always will be my home, I really learned to be an artist there, met the people who helped me find my voice and found an audience. Most importantly, I developed in a community of really great people.

HollywoodChicago.com: The experiences you’ve had in show business include writer, actor, director and producer. Which of these jobs seems to fit you best, or do each make the others that much more experiential?

Mercier: It probably is the latter part of that question. I went to school for acting, mostly because I felt it would be the place where I would learn the most creatively. I love acting so much, but I do also feel guilty sometimes about it...when I was in college it felt strange to be on stage and ask people to give attention to me. [laughs] I would balance that by being on crew or producing something afterwards.

I really like being able to support other people while performing or producing. When working with people from other backgrounds or diversities, it’s still important to be able to make the thing you want to make. For example, in Los Angeles, if you don’t know how to do something on your own, people out here will take 100 percent advantage of you. It compromises your creative integrity and more importantly it compromises your self confidence. You need that self confidence to be able to make the work that is important to you and that allows you to connect to other people, and to connect people to one another.

HollywoodChicago.com: You did a stint as Artistic Director and Ensemble Member of the Neo Futurists. For neophytes, what is the concept of the show you regularly performed in, ‘Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind’ and how did performing in that show evolve you as an actor?

Mercier: I don’t know where I would be creatively if I hadn’t done that show, and been in that company. Maybe an administrative assistant at a downtown law firm? [laughs] It was an accelerated way for me to learn how to communicate as an artist.

The show itself is described by its subtitle, ‘30 Plays in 60 Minutes.’ It’s five to seven performers, and the 30 plays are written beforehand, and new ones are placed in occasionally, all determined by the roll of a die. We pitched on Tuesday, got the assignments, and memorized them by Friday. There are so many different artists who come through and do the show, dancers and artists and poets, it was a very eclectic scene.

HollywoodChicago.com: How was that a unique experience for you?

Mercier: The performing world is generally very competitive, but the only competition I ever felt in the Neo-Futurists was the competition to do a better show each week. Artistically, it was like being in a commune. The show itself was so random, it was seat-of-the-pants performance, and the idea as a group was to finish the show and make it better, and that made my own work better. It was a solid foundation for me, especially in how I want to collaborate.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did you become involved with director Kris Swanberg, and subsequently her husband, filmmaker Joe Swanberg? How did that lead to collaborating on ‘Unexpected’?

Mercier: I met Kris through a benefit we did at the Neo Futurists around 2009. It was an ice cream social, and Kris had a local ice cream company. She enthusiastically agreed to contribute, and noted that our show was much like how Joe and her put films together. This was around the time that Joe was making about seven films a year, and I started working with him on a few projects – and even as he’s gotten bigger projects, he’ll always give me role in them.

While I was doing that, Kris and I became friends, and asked me to write a film with her. I thought, okay, that would be fun. But Kris is so driven, she told me she was going to make the film. Two years later, she got it into production. She proved to me it’s not out of reach.



Cobie Smulders and Gail Bean in 'Unexpected,' written by Kris Swanberg and Megan Mercier
Photo credit: Alchemy Studio

HollywoodChicago.com: 'Unexpected' was a beautifully rendered tale of different types of pregnancies, which allowed a glimpse into attitudes regarding birth in different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Thematically, what were the goals that you and Kris wanted for the story, as far as what you wanted to communicate?

Mercier: It was partially autobiographical for Kris, because she went through something similar with a former student of hers, in that they became pregnant at the same time. And similar to the film, the idea of 'helping' the student may have not applied to the world the girl lived in. It was tricky, because the younger character was African American and we were two white girls writing about the situation. But when we were writing dialogue, ultimately it became about two women having a conversation, and about the honesty in the story telling.

HollywoodChicago.com: Hollywood and the Oscars are awash in controversy presently, regarding the lack of diversity in their awards. How do you think we can use this year as a cautionary lesson, and what do you think needs to be done specifically to increase diversity?

Mercier: I've been thinking about this a lot, even as I'm kind of on the perimeter of it all and not directly inside. I've been in Los Angeles for two years now, and I've never been more aware of my status as a woman since I've lived here, and not necessarily in a good way. It becomes oppressive and degrading at times, because I really think when a business shuts out large groups of people, it comes from a place of fear and intimidation. We have to keep working on and believing in the stories we want to tell, and that we can connect them to an audience, because in that connection we can create a dialogue. Because if any gender or group is being shut out of communicating a dialogue, that is a problem. I don't totally know how to fix that.

HollywoodChicago.com: Women in Film Chicago is an advocacy organization for women in all kind of media arts. What encouraging signs do you see happening in the business that allows you to believe that as a whole it is turning the corner on gender equality, or do they still have miles to go?

Mercier: There are ways we're moving forward, but also ways we're moving back. I'm reading Gloria Steinem's book right now, 'Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellion,' and although it was written in 1983, it's shocking in its relevancy. I feel like back then women were even farther ahead than they are now, it feels as if we've taken a step back.

But there are shows like 'Transparent,' is a really fantastic example of a story that creates social change, but also addresses personal identity. The creator of the show, Jill Soloway, has such a great philosophy not only about the show, but how she hires people for the show from diverse backgrounds, both gender and ethnic. That is definite progress, because we're talking about things that we haven't talked about before.

HollywoodChicago.com: Is there anything else in general society that you observe that is encouraging for progress?

Mercier: It's all about being able to raise another generation of people using a different language, and teaching them through a different lens. We are creating national noise in that sense, even infiltrating areas outside the bigger cities. It's making everyone more aware, and accepting all identities in human beings.

HollywoodChicago.com: How do collectives like Women in Film Chicago remain important to you?

Mercier: I'm so happy that Chicago has this organization, which encourages people in the city to aim bigger. We live in a time where you

don't necessarily have to live in New York or Los Angeles to make great art, and get it seen. Chicago is such an amazing place, with women who are making great strides. I'm very honored to be recognized by Women in Film Chicago.

The Women in Film Chicago annual Focus Awards will take place Thursday, January 28th, 2016, at the ArcLight Cinema, 1500 North Clybourn Avenue in Chicago. For more information, including purchasing tickets to the event, [click here](#). [19]



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