

Interview: Director David Farrier Finds No Mirth in ‘Tickled’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on June 23, 2016 - 4:45pm

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CHICAGO – In the underbelly of American society, if you dig deep enough, there is also an underbelly to the underbelly. When a New Zealand journalist named David Farrier goes to such depths, on a story about competitive tickling (yes, tickling people to laughing fits), he gets much more than he bargained for.

“Tickled” is the result of his investigation. The word “investigation” seems silly for a look into a tickling fetish world, but the more Farrier gets closer to the truth, the more he is harassed and threatened. Who is doing the harassment and threatening is the major thesis in the film, in surprising and chilling ways.



Let the Games Begin: A Strange Sport is Investigated in ‘Tickled’

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

David Farrier was both journalist and co-director (with Dylan Reeve) in this misadventure, and never gave up on the story even as it devolved to madness. HollywoodChicago.com talked to him during a Chicago promotional tour.

HollywoodChicago.com: This story had a real Alice-down-the-Rabbit-Hole quality to it. At what point in the investigation did it become most surreal, and how did you get past that point to continue the story?

David Farrier: Probably when the company we were looking into, in association with the tickling competition, sent those three guys from New York City to New Zealand and talked to us. Up to that point it had been a lot of legal threats, but it felt full on once those three people landed in Auckland with full first class travel and hotel accommodations. We’d have these conversations where one, there is not story, and two, if we continued to pursue the story we’d be sued to the ground. That was one of the more surreal weeks of my life.

HollywoodChicago.com: Last week in Los Angeles, the corporate subject of your film confronted your co-director at a premiere screening, regarding the content within the story. What do you think this entity is trying to accomplish that they didn’t accomplish during the harassment you received while in production?

Farrier: I don’t know. All I know is that, from a publicity standpoint, it was amazing for us. because I want people to watch the film. It was like having a screening of ‘Blackfish’ [the SeaWorld documentary] and having an Orca in the audience. This group of people have exhibited characteristics of bullying in the past, and they’re seemingly just going to continue.

One of them literally stood up during the Q&A and told Dylan [Reeve] that the legal action we thought had stopped, was about to start again. The audience thought maybe we’d hired actors to do that, and it was a wacky publicity stunt. The discussion continued to the street, and several people took pictures and video of it. I don’t think they can help it...they can’t stop being bullies.

HollywoodChicago.com: This film ultimately flirts with themes of wealth and power in America. Where they once sent goons to beat up people, they now use the legal system. How do you think the legal system devalues itself in the protection of the wealthy?

Farrier: It is not just devalued, but seems broken in my opinion. They’ll sue anybody, and they don’t need to be right. You could be sued on any grounds, and it costs a lot of money to defend yourself. And they know that...they can make a legal threat and not spend that much money relative to what they’ve got. The one being sued, especially if they have no money, doesn’t stand a chance.

Within the film, there was a company who seemingly had unlimited funds, bullying suing people who had nothing – people with so little money that they would take part in a tickling competition for cash. Yes, America is a pretty interesting place.

HollywoodChicago.com: Competitive tickling has to be the strangest sport that has ever grabbed a foothold in our strange society. What is most disturbing about the attempted mainstreaming of such a sport, and could it have occurred without the internet?

Farrier: Yes, I think the tickling part is fine. There is a person we talked to in the film who makes his whole living with tickling porn for people. People subscribe, and the persons in the films know what the purpose of them are. That’s fine. But with the entities in the film, the persons who are in those videos also have been harassed and threatened. The problem with this media company is that boys who participate don’t expect the videos to go online, or get their lives torn apart.

HollywoodChicago.com: You grew up in the New Zealand culture. When you begin to immerse yourself in how America operates, what surprises you in your observation on how the American culture conducts itself?

Farrier: This is a problem all over the Western world, but amplified in America – it is a land of extremes. As you mentioned before, the issue is about money and power, and the control those two things can give a person. And if you don’t have money in America, you are kind of f**ked. There is a real disparity there, and not much that can be done.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since this documentary is basically a journalistic procedural, how important was the design and look of the film in creating the impact for the story, and where do you think it was best used?

Farrier: My background is in journalism, and when we were making ‘Tickled,’ the news program I was on was being dismantled, and all the investigative teams were fired. So I’m currently depressed about the state of journalism in New Zealand, and there are less outlets to tell stories that really matter.

I’m a new filmmaker, and I was really encouraged by the fact that we could still tell a compelling story through documentary. While it is for entertainment consumption, you can tell a story in an entertaining way and it still has power. We wanted it to look like a film, we wanted it to look and sound amazing. If you tell the story, you’re going to get people to watch it. I thought of it as a news story, and it had so much in it that the longer format of film was perfect. In this format, journalism is far from dead.



Director David Farrier in Chicago for ‘Tickled’

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: Speaking of journalism, the information industry has changed profoundly in the past twenty years, and a profit model is getting harder to come by. How do you think this is going to change the relationship of the journalist to the power structure he is trying to expose?

Farrier: It's difficult. You have a situation now where newsrooms don't have the resources to go after a story. The circumstance of last year's film ‘Spotlight,’ where a group of reporters were funded, and could spend a year or more on a story, to go after these institutions. Would the Catholic Church been exposed if it were happening now? It's a huge loss, when newsrooms are no longer funded. We have to get more savvy on our side. We're all figuring it out, while we're all at the same time in a panic.

HollywoodChicago.com: The U.S. recently had yet another mass shooting, its most deadly in history. Since New Zealand also has an ongoing debate regarding guns, what do you observe about the gun culture of both countries in their similarities and differences?

Farrier: Gun control in New Zealand is much tighter than here. We have a pretty robust system for gun control. Handguns can only be shot in a firing range, for example. It's a very complex topic, but when some people think that arming everyone with handguns will somehow reduce deaths, is just maddening to me.

I would argue that even if everyone in that nightclub had a handgun, the situation wouldn't have improved. Part of the film was we were confronting people who didn't want to be confronted. In New Zealand, there is no problem with this, in America there might be guns. Somehow it has to get sorted out.

HollywoodChicago.com: There is no doubt that this story is not over. Since so much of it has to do with shining a light on the dark recesses of a dark corporate soul, what illumination do you anticipate in the future of this story?

Farrier: We'll probably learn what drove them to do this. And also we'll see the people who have been enabling them, because they have money. I feel like they are surrounded by people who just see a paycheck, and these people who cash in are enabling the bad behavior, instead of tapping these people on the shoulder and telling them to calm down and think about what they're doing. But they are taking the money, and charging forward with whatever that money is buying. I just wish this corporate dynamic would get some help from people who are not lawyers.

“Tickled” continues its limited run in Chicago at the Music Box Theatre – 3733 North Southport Avenue – on June 24th. See local listings for other venues and show times. Directed by David Farrier and Dylan Reeve. Rated “R”



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Source URL (retrieved on *Apr 24 2024 - 5:37am*):
<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/26611/interview-director-david-farrier-finds-no-mirth-in-tickled>

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