

## Interview: Co-Director Erica Weiss on ‘The View From Tall’ at Midwest Independent Film Festival

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CHICAGO – The actualities that define adolescence are always prime for new territory in drama, and that is what the Chicago-based film “The View from Tall” accomplishes. Co-directed by Erica Weiss and Caitlin Parrish, it will be screened at the Midwest Independent Film Festival on Tuesday, April 4th, 2017 (details below).

The story centers on Justine (Amanda Drinkall), a highly intelligent high school senior who feels like an outsider in her insular adolescent community. Her rebellion was a consensual relationship with a teacher, and the subsequent problems when the situation is exposed has the teacher exiled, and places Justine in therapy. Her facilitator is Douglas (Michael Patrick Thornton), a wheelchair bound therapist who frees her thoughts and reactions. Their intimacy evokes feelings that neither one of them expect, which raises the suspicions of Justine’s sister Paula (Carolyn Braver).



Michael Patrick Thornton & Amanda Drinkall in ‘The View From Tall,’ next at the Midwest Independent Film Festival

*Photo credit: Tyler Core for the ‘The View From Tall,’ LLC*

The Midwest Independent Film Festival is a year-round movie event in Chicago that takes place the first Tuesday of every month, at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema. The festival has been recognized by *Chicago Magazine* in their “Best of Chicago” issue, and has become one of the top places for local filmmakers, producers and actors to network in the city. HollywoodChicago.com spoke to Erica Weiss on her collaboration with Caitlin Parrish, her connection to the lead character and how “The View from Tall” can express progress in its overview of young women in society.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** One element from the production that I found truly fascinating was that the story was updated from a stage play that

co-director Caitlin Parrish wrote when she was 18 years old, and then updated as a screenplay when she was an adult. What key place in the film does the evolution and maturing of that story become most evident?

**Erica Weiss:** Without giving anything away, it was actually the ending that had the biggest shift. It was more planned, and the characters had more of an expiration date in their relationship in regards to what had transpired in the story. In the play it was more open ended, but the film takes a more complex view, and allows us to wrestle with whether the circumstance were the right thing to do, and allows the characters to do the right thing. Another big change was in the lead character of Justine. In the play, she was more self righteous and above it all, and the story followed that emotion, but in the film she is not always right.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The sexual politics of women and their relationships are interestingly explored from the perspective of two teenage girls. How were you and Caitlin able to inject your understanding of that part of your lives into the performances of Amanda and Carolyn?

**Weiss:** I can speak for the both of us – because Caitlin and I discussed it – because ultimately it was about being younger women in high school, but not being able to relate to our peer group and feeling older than the age of the people around us. And also it was about the girls around us, who seemed to be more willing to do and have fun with the high school thing. That certainly altered the way we thought about the entanglements of that age, and how they played out.

We felt mature, which made us feel like we could handle adult decisions, and that was different than acting on impulse. That made us feel like we owned it, and had tremendous agency, but the pitfall – like Justine and the teacher – was that we could easily be taken advantage of, by adults who could manipulate that you think you're acting on your own behalf. It was a different type of exploration, a choice that the teacher makes to create the exploitation.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** So how did that apply to the experiences of you and Caitlin?

**Weiss:** We weren't necessarily telling our stories, but portraying an empathy for what Justine goes through, and why she makes the decisions that she makes, is what we related to in that context. I hope what the film tells us in the end is that she will be okay, and the decisions that she made will not make her a childhood victim, but a woman in her own right.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The main men in the story are an indifferent father, a ghost [the teacher] that has run away and a lonely therapist who finds himself falling into a moral vacuum. What do understand about the choices of men that you think came to the surface in 'The View From Tall'?

**Weiss:** Well obviously the film is most sympathetic to Douglas the therapist, as it focuses on him and his loneliness. Justine in the film is on the brink of adulthood, but the grown-ups who were closest to her were still very distant, which left a vacuum that caused her to seek out relationships with older men like the teacher... and in turn that became more important than seeking out relationships with her people her own age.

The men you mentioned have different distances from Justine, which is about men seeing young women for who they are, rather than any other type of assessment. For example, her father saw Justine as a little girl who embarrassed him through her actions, and he doesn't understand it. The teacher saw her as a mark, because he figured out she was seeking approval and validation from an older man. Douglas was the only one that ultimately saw her for who she actually was, and in the end everyone desires to be seen in that way.



Caitlin Parrish (left) and Erica Weiss on the Set of 'The View From Tall'

Photo credit: Tyler Core for the 'The View From Tall,' LLC

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Amanda Drinkall was an amazing discovery, and was fearless in her performance. Of all the younger actresses you saw in the casting process, what did Amanda understand about Justine that the others did not?

**Weiss:** First, Amanda was older than the other actresses we saw, even to the point where we weren't sure if she would look like a teenager on screen. But then we did a camera test, and it turned out to be the right casting. The character of Justine was never intended to seem like she was that young anyway, and the other characters around her tended to forget she was a teenager, and we also wanted at times for the audience to forget that as well. Amanda walked within that part of Justine that was 17 years old going on 35, and that was the character.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** I thought the costuming was key as well, because her clothing reflected her adolescence, but there is also a point in the film where she emerges confidently with a key costume change...

**Weiss:** My costume designer, Alarie Hammock, has been working with me in the theater since 2011, and this was her first feature film. She really understood the character and her evolution, from someone who didn't particularly want to be seen to someone who is seen.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** One of the key lines for me was when Douglas says to Justine – regarding going off to college – that she will be ‘trying on a new version of herself,’ and everything will change after that time. When have you, in your life, tried on a new version of yourself, and how did it relate to that back to Justine?

**Weiss:** That line rings true for both Caitlin and I, we both were able to do that in college. College gives you an opportunity to start fresh with a new group of people, with a chance to say ‘this is the version of myself that I want to be.’ And also you realize that everyone else is going through the same thing, in terms of reinvention.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Recently our country went through a profound rejection of progress, and elected a man who both represents the patriarchy and our lowest fears. What specifically will this mean for women, in your point of view, and how can we best all fight back?

**Weiss:** I think the most catastrophic result of the election, in terms of gender politics specifically, was the validation and an elevation of behavior that is exploitative, disrespectful and misogynistic. What this validation did is teach young men that it's okay to live and practice within an attitude of harassment, and devalue female voices.

Films like ‘The View from Tall’ are designed to fight back that narrative, no matter who wins an election. Young women, most importantly, need to be seen by their peers – and especially older men – as strong, independent people with their own authentic voices. Women who tell stories and make art are using those creations as the best weapon to counter this catastrophic election... which was and is a genuine attempt to silence women, and we will not be silenced.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What is your final pitch to a potential audience for the film, in the sense of what they can get from it when they come on Tuesday?

**Weiss:** First, what has surprised me in our previous festival showings – counter to the goal of creating this film as a representative story for women, that we wanted to see when we were teenagers – is that it touched a much broader audience. Men and women of all ages saw something that they identified with, and that was really powerful.

It was gratifying to experience the resonance of the film, and we've been very excited that it expanded its connection to different audiences, especially in the disability community. It's a funny, challenging and sincere film, and it's relatable even when it asks the audience to grapple with the tougher questions in it.

*The Midwest Independent Film Festival presents “The View from Tall” on Tuesday, April 4th, 2017, at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema, 2828 North Clark Street, Chicago. Co-director Erica Weiss, lead actor Michael Patrick Thornton and co-producer Mary Kay Cook will appear at the screening for an audience Q&A. For more information, and to purchase tickets, [click here](#). [16]*



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