

Kimberly Peirce Breaks It Down For You

Written by Janet Harvey, SOA Writing '98
Wednesday, 18 February 2009 16:11



In both her work and her life, director Kimberly Peirce SOA Film '96 defies stereotype and speaks from the heart. Her debut feature, *BOYS DON'T CRY*, drew comparisons to *BADLANDS* and *IN COLD BLOOD* for its stark, achingly honest portrayal of murdered teen Brandon Teena — and incidentally, won a shelf full of awards including two Golden Globes and an Oscar for its two young stars, Hilary Swank and Chloe Sevigny. Her long-awaited follow-up, *STOP - LOSS*, takes on a radically different subject — the Bush administration's policies in the Iraq war — but still explores a territory that is profoundly and distinctly American, with passion, sensitivity, and a rare gift for observation. Her storytelling comes out of integrity that is, as she puts it, "my gyroscope, my emotional compass."

I had the opportunity to sit down with Kimberly and discuss her journey as a filmmaker, how her experience at Columbia has shaped her as an artist, and the part they don't teach you in film school: the practical skill of navigating the insanity of studio development. For her, it's all part of the same job: telling the story she wants to tell.

JH: So, why Columbia? And how has your experience there informed your approach to directing?

KP: First of all, I chose Columbia because there was an emphasis on writing and working with actors, and I think both are completely essential to directing. The more you can write, the more you can see yourself re-written, the more times you can see your writing acted out by actors, that's invaluable. Because in that process, you are learning how dramatic structure works and learning how to see and hear it at work. You're seeing what a good story is. Story and character are really at the heart of everything.

I think that emphasis at Columbia is dead-on, and that's what I would encourage anybody who is considering the program to think about: make sure you protect the writing and the acting. You can take directing classes, but for me, directing classes only helped in tandem with writing and acting classes. Any time you take classes from someone who knows what they're doing, you're going to pick up something, but there's only so much someone can tell you about how they have directed something before you have to learn by doing it yourself. There's the form of it, but really it's all about understanding the mechanics of story and how emotions and story work, and how to dramatize things, both in scene and performance.

JH: What was your background before you got to Columbia? Were you a writer, actor, working in theater?

KP: I was more of a writer, photographer and an animator. Ever since I was a kid, I drew pictures, made animations, and was very interested in storytelling. I used to make little books for my friends, I lived in Japan for some time, and photographed all throughout Asia. I would

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publish my photographs whenever I could, or make photographic essays. So I was definitely in the visual arts/writing area.

Columbia was great for me, because it really threw me into dramatic filmmaking which was very new to me. I got to work with Carlin Glynn and Lenore DeKoven. I worked mostly with Lenore, I spent a number of years with her. She has a way of teaching acting that really helps break it down for people who, in some ways, are thinking more cerebrally than dramatically about directing. That was incredibly helpful. I took acting classes for three years, but also took some acting outside of Columbia and I think that was hugely important. I would be taking an acting class now if I had the time.

JH: So was that your first experience working with actors?

KP: Actually, it was. I really didn't think it would be that hard, because I had looked at movies, and I understood them emotionally really well. But Lenore's method was like learning another language. You can have all this awareness of human behavior, which is really important, but to be able to take the ideas and the stories that you have in your head, get them on paper, and communicate them to an actor and a crew to reproduce them onscreen, you have to learn to break it down into parts. I loved storytelling and great narrative films, and Columbia made me understand how to reproduce that.

JH: It sounds like you work a lot with improvisation as well.

KP: I do. A lot of my filmmaking comes from observing human behavior. I've been constantly observing it ever since I was a kid. Either recording it - I would carry tape recorders around - or writing things down verbatim. I like to retell stories verbatim, or retell them in new ways to figure out how they work. So I'm always in the process of recording and improvising material.

One way I've learned how to write is by listening to real conversations and seeing how people tell stories and jokes. Then during the rehearsal process I take the core of the scene and let the actors improv within it. I learn more about the scene — what sounds right, what works better rhythmically, a better turn of phrase, whether there's a weakness in the scene. I use rehearsal and improv to really find the heart of the scene, and if we find better language, I use that.

JH: Is it a long or short rehearsal process?

KP: It's never long enough for me, because you never have enough money or time to rehearse everything you want. It's one of the great challenges of filmmaking. Unfortunately everything is so expensive, chances are I'm still casting parts while I'm location scouting and prepping. That's just been the nature of it on both films. I've never had the privilege of having it all complete and then going to rehearse for a few weeks. I've pretty much only gotten four or five days to rehearse an entire movie.

You're not going to be able to rehearse every scene. You just don't physically have the time so you have to very systematically figure out, what are the most important scenes and the most important emotions you and the actors need to explore before shooting. If you get these

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scenes somewhat working, then you can draw from that work when trying to get the others working.

Whenever I can, I rehearse in the location we are going to shoot in. It's a rare privilege, as it means days before shooting that scene, you have to have found the location and locked it down. If it's an action sequence I let the actors find their positions, try out the scene and from that do a loose blocking. I videotape it to the extent I can with multiple cameras, then do a precut beforehand to see which angles work best.

JH: So you kind of sketch it out in rehearsal.

KP: Yes, I use the rehearsal on location and videocameras very much as sketchpads.

JH: What was your schedule like on STOP - LOSS?

KP: It was around 55 days, but that included shooting in Texas, New York, Los Angeles and Morocco. I had five days in Morocco to shoot all the war stuff.

JH: Do you find that you are offered projects, or that people make assumptions about you, because you are a female director? Or do you find yourself fielding questions based on your gender? I just remember seeing an interview with you where you said "I like blowing things up..." and I was like "Hey that's awesome, I like blowing things up too!"

KP: (Laughs) Well yeah, I do like blowing things up. I do like big action. What I really love is great characters and great stories. But I like them played out on a very dramatic scale. THE GODFATHER is one of my favorite movies. I do commentary on the new release of the GODFATHER DVD. I love that movie in particular because it works so well dramatically, both intimately and physically, and on the familial and societal level. It has incredibly powerful quiet moments as well as amazing killings, gunfights, and well, things blowing up... it's full-scale entertainment.

I want to use the terms masculine and feminine very carefully — I would say that I have what most people would probably perceive as a "masculine" sensibility, simply because the movies I am drawn to and the movies I like are very dramatic, with strong characters, who have strong drives and who meet their needs with strong actions — they're muscular, action oriented, and terse. They're also mostly directed by men, but that's generally because men are the ones who have been making the majority of the films, not because women can't or don't want to make those types of films.

So in terms of what I get offered, no, I don't think that it's along what you would call "female" lines. And I think that is because BOYS DON'T CRY and STOP - LOSS had such a non-"female" sensibility. That doesn't mean reality female or reality male, that's just about perception. But then again, I don't think anyone is thinking, "Oh, we have a really 'girly' film, we should go to Kim."

JH: Right.

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KP: So I don't feel like I am being pigeonholed in terms of content. I do think though, if I was to be honest — and this is not something that I would have believed a few years ago — but I do believe it's harder for women. The statistics are that only 6% of features are directed by women — which is horrible, and obviously we need to change that. In the past, I would have said that I slipped by, that I'm not affected by it. Because I happen to be working, right? I'm in that 6 percent. But as time goes by I'm beginning to see it is very hard for women. I think it is a very subtle thing. I think to correct it, we need to bend over backwards and help women get the experience they need to tell their stories and get their movies made.

JH: Speaking of getting projects moving: with STOP - LOSS you did this thing where you sold it greenlit, basically.

KP: I did.

JH: Do you want to talk about that process, or the process of getting projects off the ground within the studio system?

KP: Well you know, the studio system has an incredibly high rate of what they call "development hell." Many, many projects are developed, for lots of money. Very few of them become movies. That's just statistically true — I don't know if it's 80, 85 percent. A filmmaker doesn't have time to develop at that ratio. We need to make movies. Ideally, you would want a one-to-one ratio. Every movie you develop, you make.

I have been through the studio development process and watched very good ideas get ruined, simply by the bureaucracy and the number of people who are making decisions that are not necessarily for the good of the project — not because they want to malign the project, but because they're not intimately involved in it.

For example, you end up selling a fantastic pitch. They say "Great, let's get the best writer," because if you don't have a good first draft, it's going to slow everything down. But then they don't get you the best writer. They get you the guy or girl who's half the price. Not that he or she couldn't be brilliant, but if the writer turns in a draft that makes them lose excitement, you're done.

Having a gift for developing material is rare. Some producers and executives, such as Scott Rudin, Donna Langley, Peter Rice, and James Shamus and Michael Hausman (who both teach at Columbia), are consistently able to turn out good movies because they understand story, character, drama and action on the level we talked about before, and they know how to develop. When you are lucky enough to have someone like that, then it's amazing to watch each draft get better than the previous one. But that is rare, and unfortunately, it can be very hard to see past a weak first draft, even if the underlying story is still strong.

So you started out with this phenomenal idea that you had fully outlined and was a winner of a movie, somebody takes a bunch of money for a first draft, and then they send in a draft that doesn't work. The excitement level dies, and your project is in trouble.

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JH: And there's a lien against it at that point?

KP: Well sure. Any money they spend on it they have to recoup before they let it go into turnaround, which allows another studio to buy it. Say there is already \$600 thousand against it, they'll add development costs and interest to that too.

JH: So the new studio assumes those costs in turnaround.

KP: Yes. And again, you're just the person who had this idea that you were in love with, that you wanted to turn into a movie and now it's stalled.

When I was coming off of BOYS DON'T CRY, I was very empowered to get a lot of projects set up. I didn't set up a ton of them, but I did set up a couple of things I was very passionate about and encountered some of the challenges that people face in the system.

You have talented, creative people who love creating. If I could be on a set every day of my life, or working with actors or writing, I would be. That's how most artists are, so when you meet other artists and there's this fatigue, you start thinking of ways to bypass it. Because I want to make movies.

I had another movie, SILENT STAR — I had cast Annette Bening, Hugh Jackman, Ben Kingsley, and Evan Rachel Wood. For me to cast a movie it means that I have gotten the script to a point where the studio is willing to greenlight it. I have met with every one of those actors and gotten them on board. After I got all the actors, the studio ran the numbers and they said, "We'd like to see the 30 million dollar version of this movie, but we'd like to pay for the 20 million dollar version." When it was not possible to cut the budget and retain the scale of the film, they said, "We want to see the bigger version, but we don't want to pay for it." After that, I asked myself, "How can I get back to doing what I do best — making movies, shooting, and directing?"

JH: And that informed your approach to STOP - LOSS.

KP: Right. Two weeks after SILENT STAR came to a halt and I started my next project, I said, "Let me front the money for the initial development, and let me pick a topic that's accessible and I can move quickly." I was already deeply involved in the Iraq war, because my brother was over there fighting. So I picked up my video camera, bought some film, bought an airline ticket, traveled to some small towns and started interviewing people — soldiers and their families. I was electrified by the interview process and the drama that I was seeing unfold. I didn't know exactly what the movie would be, but I did know what I was seeing was much more interesting than any movie I was seeing. So I figured it was worth the time exploring and what I made of it would be interesting.

And then I got a writer, Mark Richard, to work on spec, which is a miracle, because nobody out here likes to work on spec. And we holed ourselves up for 10 weeks in my house, and we just wrote every day. My agents read it and said "Okay, we need to sell it right now." I said "Well wait a second — I think we need more time to develop it." And they said, "No, it's hot, and it

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may not be if other Iraq War movies get sold or come out, so let's go now." The fact that I could sell a spec script as a greenlit movie suddenly meant that we were making the movie, and I was gonna be rewriting it as we went.

So in that way, everyone is like "Hey, you wrote yourself a free ticket." Well, yeah: by fronting the money, and the time. If STOP-LOSS hadn't sold, I would have been broke. But at a certain point, there is so much joy in working that you're willing to do that.

So, yes — it was a really smart move on my part, but it was also informed by the experiences I had had and just the desire to tell a story that I care about. STOP-LOSS was probably one of the greatest experiences of my life. I was very much against the war and very devastated by what was happening. My friends and I marched in both NY marches against the wars. The Iraq war march was especially devastating because the day after the biggest world wide turn out and a huge presence in New York, America bombed Iraq.

It broke my heart. In a way my heart had been broken many times with that administration. I remember looking at all my friends and thinking "We've always been politically active, we've gone to marches and this is the first time I am seeing that marching is not working for us in the way we want." That's not to say I don't believe in protesting, because I do and I think it's a really powerful and effective form of expression, but in this case I think the Bush administration used the protests to prove there was free speech in America, and in some ways to silence the protesters while they initiated the war. I was very disappointed by the lack of coverage in the media which only served to diffuse the power and the energy of the march.

JH: "You guys go protest over here..."

KP: "Yeah, and we'll bomb over here." So I think I turned to the movie out of my frustration with the marches, not having the power to stop Bush from bombing, and a need to find a more powerful way to communicate the feelings and experiences of both the non soldiers who were against the war and the soldiers and the families who were experiencing it firsthand, to a mainstream audience. Doing it on spec was necessary to get it done and not get stuck with a bureaucracy that was somehow going to take me away from the process of making the movie.

JH: Can you talk about the romantic comedy you're working on now?

KP: Yes, to the extent that I can... we're making the announcement now. It's a classic romantic comedy with a gender twist. It's a love story, it's raunchy, it's sexy... it deals very explicitly with sex. And it's very much in the style of ANIMAL HOUSE, the Judd Apatow movies, and IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT. It's a story that partly happened to me but partly is based on many friends of mine that for years have been living a certain life and telling a certain story. It was getting to the point where, I'm telling this as a joke as an anecdote at parties, and the story just kept getting longer and better. And everyone's begging me to turn it into a movie, but I'm like, "It's too wild, it's too off-color. I don't know who would ever fund it."

But I was writing it, basically honing it by telling it — you know, the improv thing. One evening I was out with the head of a studio at a Lakers game, who was there with their spouse, and I

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was with my fiancée. I started to tell the story over drinks, and they were laughing so hard, they said, "That's a movie." I said, "Yeah." And they said, "I'd make that movie." So I responded, "Well you're the head of the studio. You can make that movie." And it turned out there was this fantasy producer that I would want to work with, who I was about to meet with... anyway, it all worked out.

The funny thing is I keep saying, "I just want to take an assignment, something they give me that has great character and great story and/or is a big action movie." Then what ends up happening is, something like this just naturally happens. I'm writing this as fast as I can, but I still say, "Okay, okay, but I'm really willing to go do the big BOURNE IDENTITY or something like that."

JH: Any parting words of wisdom for students at Columbia who aspire to make it in the biz?

KP: Find out what interests you and follow it. It is the most important thing. Because that is the one thing that you have to offer that's unique and that you understand and need to understand. There can be hundreds of new film students every year, but the only thing that is going to set each of these people apart is what truly, truly moves them. For me, my work comes completely out of what moves me. That's my gyroscope, that's my emotional compass.

Everybody always says to me "Should I be schmoozing, should I be at festivals?" The funny thing is, you know, after BOYS DON'T CRY, I met everybody. But that isn't what makes you make movies, or what makes you good at making movies. What makes you any good at what you do is the depth of your curiosity, and your commitment to pursuing it.

One of the reasons I chose Columbia is because I was wanted to work with working filmmakers. And I think that curiosity, the kind that an artist has for their work, is important when dealing with young artists. I think there are certainly some people who can teach you who are not artists, and they can be fantastic. And then there are other things another artist will teach you that aren't even in the lesson plan — it's simply in the way they perceive something, or in the care that they take in pursuing their own curiosity or the way they work.

I would say there's your curiosity, your passion, your innate talent, and then there's your craft, which is the thing you are always working at. I can always get better at my craft by studying and working. What's exciting about going to film school is that you're just at the beginning of the journey.

Editor's Note: STOP-LOSS was just nominated for the Prism Awards, produced by the nonprofit Entertainment Industries Council, which honors noteworthy depictions of substance abuse and mental health issues.