

LET'S GET PERSONAL

INDIE WRITER/DIRECTORS ROCKED PARK CITY (AGAIN);
WE ASKED FOUR GUILD SHOOTERS TO HELP US GET
INSIDE THEIR HEADS

by VALENTINA I. VALENTINI

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photo courtesy of Polly Morgan

The very notion of independence is rooted in the self. So too is the notion of independent film. It begins as an act of self – the idea is to make a film without having to answer to a creative hierarchy. This year at Sundance was an unusually strong one for writer-directors, and for the Local 600 cinematographers who helped to visualize their narrative voices.

One such shooter was Polly Morgan, who captured writer-director Francesca Gregorini's unique story *Emanuel and the Truth About Fishes*, which explored the grief of losing a parent and the unwelcome independence that follows. Emanuel's (Kaya Scodelario) mother died giving birth to her, and later, as a young woman, Emanuel forms a connection with a mysterious new neighbor (Jessica Biel) who bears a striking resemblance to her late mother.

"We completely deconstructed the script into levels of tension," explains Morgan, who credits Gregorini with understanding how a specific shooting style can supply visual cues to an audience. "We gave each scene a number that would relate to what was happening within Emanuel, creating a plan that showed her increasing stress and the moments of reprise. We then decided what visual techniques we felt would represent these moments to best enhance the narrative."

The approach was best expressed in the lighting for the family dining-room scenes. The first time the audience sees the family at dinner, there is a soft top-light enveloping the table. The next time, the soft light is still there but with a hotter edge to the characters. In the final dining-room scene, there is no lighting coming from outside and only a spotlight on Emanuel, leaving the other characters to fall into the shadows.

Morgan says the pain and isolation of Emanuel's life drew her into Gregorini's script. But the intimate portrait required immense preparation; *Fishes* was a short shoot with complicated dolly moves, underwater footage and an underwater scene with a baby.

"We produced a bible known on set as 'The Fish Book,'" Morgan shares. "We had overhead diagrams for each scene, and Francesca and I developed a shot list and knew all our camera positions and movements, along with lighting details and our tension number system. Anyone could know at a glance how the scene was going to be constructed visually, which was so helpful for departments, especially because by the end of the shoot, our heads were fried."



Top: *Breathe In* - Photo by Linda Slater
Bottom: *Afternoon Delight* - Courtesy of Jim Frohna

In contrast to Morgan's intense prep time, cinematographer Jim Frohna and writer-director Jill Soloway didn't have much of a shot list for the dramatic comedy *Afternoon Delight*. Not only was prep ultra-brief for Frohna (who was hired onto the picture only six days before the shoot began), but, as he explains, Soloway trusted her own instinct about how to get at the emotional nugget of each scene through blocking – she needed the freedom to discover specific shots when they got to the set.

"Jill had total belief in her process and the emotional journey of the movie," Frohna recounts. "This allowed her to make space for the rest of us to do our best work. Early on in the shoot, for example, when Rachel [Kathryn Hahn] and McKenna [Juno Temple] share a cigarette, Jill came up to me and whispered in my ear, 'You can't make any mistakes.' She was basically saying to use my intuition and everything will be all right. Isn't that what we all want from a director?"

Afternoon Delight, which centers on a bored housewife who takes a stripper into her home to 'save' her, is never forced or overly composed. Much of Frohna's experience is in documentaries, where it's about responding, staying connected and using

instinct, and he says that was one reason Soloway hired him.

"I can feel when I hit the right frame," Frohna adds. "You need to have the experience, obviously, and the artistic eye, but you can sense when you've found that perfect shot. Jill's past experiences on sets like *Six Feet Under* and *The United States of Tara* make her a remarkably personal director with self-awareness, confidence, great communication and above all, an immense amount of trust in our work. That was evidenced by her winning the Grand Jury Prize for Directing."

Soloway and Frohna bonded in their first meeting over Andrea Arnold's indie hit *Fish Tank* (2009). In that film, the camera is tethered to the main character, as an extension of her, and they knew that was what they wanted for their Sundance debut.

In one vulnerable passage – where the husbands are in one house playing poker and the wives are in another drinking wine and divulging secrets – Frohna was supremely concentrated on his lead actress.

"Every frame of that is me thinking, 'Rachel,' he recalls. "The camera work reflects Rachel's state of mind. In fact, I did specifically tell Shelly Gurzi, my first assistant, as I followed the action



Top: Rosemarie DeWitt / *Touchy Feely* / Courtesy of Benjamin Kasulke / Bottom Left: Writer/Director Lynn Shelton / Courtesy of Sundance / Bottom Right: Ellen Page & Scoot McNairy / *Touchy Feely* / Courtesy of Benjamin Kasulke

around the room not to worry if she had to catch up with the focus, because that was exactly right for the scene. It was all about following the feeling."

Visual intimacy is often helped along by a long-standing relationship between a writer-director and a cinematographer. Pairs like Drake Doremus and John Guleserian, and Lynn Shelton and Benjamin Kasulke are prime examples of how a collaborative partnership over time can bolster intimate indie filmmaking. This year, Shelton's *Touchy Feely* showed exactly how that relationship translates to the screen.

I work with all types of directors," Kasulke explains. "But I get most excited when they know their source material at its emotional core and I never have to question why we're making the film. Lynn knows her material so well, it's easy to have that trust."

Touchy Feely, which stars Rosemarie DeWitt as a massage therapist who suddenly develops a physical aversion to skin, is Shelton and Kasulke's fifth feature together. They were serendipitously paired up in Seattle at The Film Company in 2005, when

Kasulke was working at the non-profit studio as resident DP. They've collaborated on all of Shelton's projects since, including last year's Sundance hit *Your Sister's Sister*.

"There's a level of intimacy you build up with someone from just being in his or her life for so long," adds Kasulke. "Lynn and I are open books. We've gone through really great times and some really tough times. Starting *Touchy Feely*, we hadn't spent much time with each other lately, so we did an emotional check-in, making sure we were okay as friends so that we could get to work on set."

The obvious plus side of working in a repetitive collaboration is what goes unsaid. "I know what lights Lynn would probably want for a particular scene, and she knows how I'm going to want to run things with the crew," Kasulke continues. "Environments like that take the extraneous conversation out of the process so that the director can work with the actors and the story and I can work with the camera and lighting. For the rest of my life, if Lynn calls with a movie, I'm there."

Guleserian, who attended AFI with Doremus in the early