Cultural Daily

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Ramin Bahrani: "At Any Price," Willie Loman on the Prairie

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, April 24th, 2013

"At Any Price," the third feature film from director Ramin Bahrani opens with a montage; four generations of family movies introduce the Whipples, the Iowa farm family at the nucleus of this modern American tragedy. You think things are headed in one direction, but the story takes a number of unexpected and disquieting turns, to finish as a morality tale of biblical proportions. "At Any Price" very accurately captures the cut-throat competitiveness of business today, where winning – at any price – is rewarded above all else. Bahrani attacks complex issues, to paint a portrait of people and country that provokes consideration.

With "Chop Shop" and "Goodbye Solo," Bahrani established himself, directing non-actors – people cast off the street, who had never appeared on camera before – in award-nominated films and performances. This time out, in "At Any Price," he is working with seasoned professionals: Dennis Quaid plays the lead role of farmer and seed salesman, Henry Whipple, which Robert Ebert hailed as "the performance of a lifetime." Zac Efron, as his aspiring Nascar race driver son, Dean, "nails it," concur co-star Quaid and director Bahrani. True to form, Bahrani launches the career of notable newcomers; Maika Monroe, as Dean's girlfriend Cadence, in particular, is a revelation. (Soon to be featured in Jason Reitman's "Labor Day" and Sofia Coppola's "The Bling Ring")

Director Ramin Bahrani

Bahrani is known for the extensive research he does on location, as part of his process in developing his screenplays. This exploration pays off with revealing and cinematic use of locations in "At Any Price," supported by Director of Photography, Michael Simmonds. Dean's steamy rendezvous inside a grain bin with his father's mistress, Meredith (played by actress Heather Graham) and her post-coital intoxication, tripping in the grain, is one of many indelible impressions. Bahrani shares writing credit for the screenplay with Hallie Elizabeth Newton. The dialogue is sharp, the characters complex, with strong and nuanced roles for men and women alike.

Set in the heartland of the American Midwest, the setting and story is not one that you might expect from Bahrani, who was born and raised in North Carolina. At the inception of each new project, Bahrani probes his imagination to consider, "What do we need now." "I thought that this film could be an alarm bell that would ring out from the cornfields," he explains. "Our story is Willy Loman popping his head up out of the cornfields and saying, "I killed myself for a reason!"

Sophia Stein recently sat down in conversation with director Bahrani and actor Quaid, to discuss their working relationship, the basis of their collaboration on "At Any Price," and the corruption of the American dream.

Zac Efron (l) as Dean and Dennis Quaid as Henry; Photo by Matt Dinerstein, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

Sophia Stein: In 2007, Roger Ebert crowned you "Director of the Decade." How did he impact your development as a filmmaker and your career?

Ramin Bahrani: I really don't think I would be sitting here without Roger Ebert. I don't think Dennis would know about me, I don't think that his agents would have known about me, and I don't think that I would have gotten financing to make this film. I always feel him when I am working. Every film I make, I feel like I have to make better than the last — so that maybe I could make something that Roger would really be proud of. The film has to be up to his standard. I don't think that I have gotten there ever — no matter what he said about me. Roger Ebert's passing was a huge loss personally and a huge loss for cinema.

S2: Dennis, what inspired you to work with Ramin?

Dennis Quaid: One of the big reasons that I wanted to work with Ramin — I don't know if you saw "Chop Shop," but the performance of that kid… just the little things, like the way he would come in from the street and just jump up and grab the door like he'd done it a hundred times before. You almost felt like you were watching a documentary. I told Ramin, "If you can get a performance out of me, like you did out of that kid, that's really what I'm looking for."

S2: Ramin, did you always have in mind to cast Dennis in the lead role as Henry Whipple?

RB: I have loved Dennis' work going back to "Breaking Away," which I think is one of the really great films, and "The Right Stuff." I knew his movies, but then I googled him, and watched him on YouTube doing some improvisational comedy on "Ellen," that was so funny! … I didn't know Dennis, I just live in someplace in Brooklyn?! But I thought I had a little bit of a sense of who he might actually be as a person, based on his comedy with Ellen. He just seemed like he was being himself somehow. Then I went back and looked at a couple of his films again. To take this guy — who went to outer space for America and was training baseball teams, doing all these great things — and turn him into somebody so corrupt — I thought it could be really fun and interesting. I went to visit Dennis in Austin for three days, and we got along immediately. Dennis is a real intellectual; he reads endlessly, he knows cinema, and he knows history. By the end of the second day, I realized, *Oh, my God, I'm leaving tomorrow, and we didn't really talk much about the movie?!* I called him and I said, "Dennis, I'm so happy we're doing this film together, I feel so connected already. And I really want you to be recognized — because I think you're such a great actor, and I hope that this could be a role that could do that." And Dennis said, "You know I don't want any of those things." So I asked, "Then what do you want?" And he said, "I want to be the kid in 'Chop Shop' who jumps up and grabs the door." (This is a dream, I got a movie star who says things like that!)

S2: You have a history of working with non-actors. How was the experience of directing professional actors different for you?

RB: I'm used to rehearsing with non-actors for months. With the famous actors, you have two days of rehearsal. Dennis had come off a movie where he was working at night, and when he showed up, he was tired and grumpy. I would try to rehearse scene with him and Zac, and Dennis would mumble. It was terrifying. The night before the filming began, I was so worried that I called Werner Herzog, and I said, "Werner, you know, I am making my first film with professional actors. Dennis is not rehearsing; he's like another person. What am I supposed to do?" And Werner said (Ramin imitates Herzog's German accent), "Ramin, Dennis is a professional actor for thirty years, you are wasting his time rehearsing. He will deliver for you tomorrow when you turn on the cameras." And he did. Dennis had a way he wanted to talk, a way he wanted to walk, he had a way he wanted to hold his shoulders. He had it all planned out. He just didn't want to do it until the

camera turned on, when he had to deliver. And I would ask him, “Dennis, how did you do that?” And he would say, “Thirty years, kid, thirty years … I’m going to go to the car and get my things together.” You know, the movie was not made with a lot of money. The actors — their trailer was their car, and they never even blinked an eye.

S2: Is improvisation part of the way you worked together?

DQ: I wouldn’t say that we consciously did any improv, because we had a definite script to follow … but it felt like improvisation, the way it came together. Ramin doesn’t say “Action” or “Cut.”

RB: I think it is really strange to use words like *“and … Action!”* I can think of no other way to terrify someone and to destroy their life flow in shooting the movie. And *“Cut!”* What am I cutting, do I cut reactions in the scene? I always tell the actors, I know exactly what I want to do — this is the blocking, I have the shots planned out — but you have the freedom on the first take to do anything.

S2: Ramin, what was your seed of inspiration for this story?

RB: Initially, I was curious, probably like everyone, about where is my food coming from, and that lead me to corn. I had read Michael Pollan’s work. Then Michael and I became acquainted over the internet because of a short film that I made (featuring the voice of Werner Herzog) called “Plastic Bag.” Michael introduced me to some of the friends he had written about. I went to Iowa, and I lived with George Naylor, who is a farmer who appears in the movie. And every farmer I met kept telling me, “Expand or Die,” “Get Big or Get Out.” It seemed to me, to be a great theme. It seemed to me to be what the banking crisis, and the housing crisis, and the global economic crisis, and the whole mentality of the world is about — capitalism on steroids — here in this farming community. And then I met a seed salesman who worked for a genetically modified seed company, Pioneer, which made me think about “Death of a Salesman,” the Arthur Miller play, which had been very important for me growing up.

S2: Dennis, you have referred to the lead character Henry as “Willy Loman on the prairie.” How did that association impact your acting choices?

DQ: I remember reading “Death of a Salesman” as a young actor and really identifying more with the sons at the time. I looked at Willy Loman in a very different way now — as a guy who was past the summer of his life, really in the autumn, and just that close to his version of the American dream. Inside his whole world — the world that he grew up in, the world that he based his life on — is breaking down and falling apart. But what he expresses to the outside, is a completely different story. He has to really exude confidence out there in order to get ahead, because the world is no longer neighbor helping neighbor. It’s neighbor trying to push the other one out.

RB: It was something that I noticed in the farmers. They were so generous and welcoming to me. And I could see that they really loved their family. They loved the community, they loved their neighbors … but, they had the pressure to destroy them, if they had to, to continue their business. And that I understand.

Maika Monroe (l) as Cadence and Zac Efron as Dean; Photo by Matt Dinerstein, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

S2: As a filmmaker –

RB: As a filmmaker. I think, as a journalist — I am sorry to say, but you are at threat too, because one person can write an article for the Miami newspaper and suddenly three hundred outlets in Miami are carrying this one critic, and you’re out of a job. And mom and pop stores, with Walmart. And, and, and! So we all feel that pressure now. There is 99% of us, and then there is 1% or .1 % of us who don’t worry about these things — because they have a *private* school, a *private* doctor, a *private* security, a *private* healthcare. They don’t need to worry about those pressures.

They can judge us, but I'm not in a position to judge a Henry Whipple character. I don't know what I would do in these situations.

DQ: It is a microcosm for what I think is going on in the world now. It really is Wall Street in a cornfield. The general feeling that people have uncertainty, and the fear that that causes about the future.

RB: When I look around me, it seems crime does pay. I live in New York, so when I go to Wall Street, it would appear to pay. And when you look at Washington, which is in cahoots, it seems like it pays. So I wanted to talk about that. When de Tocqueville came to America, he noted, as a very positive aspect of America, how pragmatic the country was – meaning, what's good for me should be good for you too … but, God willing, it will be a little bit better for me. That's capitalism, it should be a little bit better for me. Now, it's what's good for me, should be bad for you … that actually ends up being bad for everybody, because now we are getting into wealth inequality, and the 99%, and Stiglitz. What was interesting, in my mind, was that in the end, Henry should get all the things that he wanted, but he should be destroyed inside his soul. And it should happen on a stage with everybody clapping for him. We were shooting that final scene, on the real farm with the real farmers and all their real families who came to be the extras, and Dennis says, "Am I a happy man?" And I did not instruct anyone to say anything, but suddenly, everyone in the audience said, "Yes!" And then, on his own accord, Dennis asks again, "Am I a happy man?," and everyone cheered even louder for him. And I thought, this is great. (*It's good not to tell people what to do sometimes!*) And we were shooting the party that follows, and suddenly, Kim Dickens (who plays Irene Whipple, Henry's wife) said, let's dance, and they started dancing. And then everybody started dancing. I liked the idea of "the terror," in juxtaposition to dancing to music that is the opposite. Cause Henry is never going to be the same person anymore. Kind of like Zampanò in "La strada," where you know he is destroyed now; it's too late for him. Sometimes a director shouldn't tell anyone anything and just should get out of the way.

For information about where the film is playing, visit the website http://sonyclassics.com/atanyprice/.

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