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CONCUSSION: A Conversation with Director Stacie Passon

Sophia Stein · Thursday, October 10th, 2013

A blow to the head from her son's baseball precipitates Abby Ableman's sexual reawakening in *CONCUSSION*, the debut feature from filmmaker Stacie Passon. Long neglected by her successful and largely asexual attorney wife, Abby heeds the prompting of a close friend to take matters into her own hands and to visit a lesbian prostitute; whereupon, Abby becomes inspired to explore working as a high-end escort herself. She develops her own practice of the ancient art with a decidedly feminine and nurturing flair. "Palpably sensual and deliciously contained, *CONCUSSION* is a keen observation of the complicated contours of midlife crisis," describes RADiUS-TWC, which has just released the film in select theatres and on-demand.

While *CONCUSSION* recounts the story of a gay married couple, I believe that it is a film that anybody who is married, or anyone who has been in a long-term committed relationship, irrespective of gender or sexual preferences, can appreciate. Robin Wiegert (*Deadwood*) gives a nuanced and poignant performance as Abby that is not to be missed. Passon demonstrates sophisticated command as a filmmaker; from screenplay to casting, performances to scoring, the film is an impressive directorial debut. *CONCUSSION* was the winner of the Special Jury Award at this year's Berlin Film Festival's Teddy Awards, and it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance.

I had the opportunity to speak with Stacie Passon at the Hilton Hotel Union Square, San Francisco where she was staying as a guest during Frameline37, The San Francisco International LGBT Film Festival, when *CONFESSION* screened as the Opening Night film earlier this year.

Sophia Stein: Who do you see as the audience for your film, *CONCUSSION*?

Stacie Passon: The pragmatic me who made this movie said — the audience will be women experiencing a mid-life crisis. I would love all of them to be exactly like me, Jewish women who are lesbians. Then I came to understand that *CONCUSSION* is really about the conversation that we are all having about marriage now. This story doesn't take the gender identity out of it, it just reframes it from a different angle. The miracle of this film is that it was accepted into Sundance over 1,200 other films, and it was picked up by RADiUS-TWC, who are heroes at this point, for me. Not only is Harvey Weinstein a master of publicity, but Jason Janego and Tom Quinn are masters of this new multi-platform video-on-demand model. They feel confident that they can find opportunities to share *CONCUSSION* with many different people.

S2: Your inspiration for the story has to do with how people's aspirations change, at different ages. How have your own aspirations changed over time?

SP: I read Esther Perel's *Mating in Captivity* when I was writing the screenplay. Perel says that it's unrealistic to believe that your 43-year old self can carry out the aspirations of your 26-year old self. When we are 26-years old, it is very important to find who our person is, to love that person and create milestones — china and getting wedding gifts, all that is really good stuff. Having that

first child – my God! The beautiful feeling of that, and the beautiful feeling of the next baby coming, if there is a next baby. Those children are on you, literally sucking on you, and the intimacy of that. You kind-of get addicted to that for a while. Then as they grow older, they start leaving you, and you start to redefine your goals. You don't really know what you want to do. You look around and see what you've become. You're a different person, a person with opinions, a person who doesn't know all the answers. I think that you're bound to change some things at that point. It's really asking yourself, what do you want to change now? For Abby, that human predicament is sexual in nature.

S2: The treatment of the characters in the film is non-judgmental — the partner who cheats is not indicted and the partner who cannot deliver sexually is not indicted. How challenging, as a writer, was it to walk that line?

SP: I didn't want Abby to get arrested or to get caught. I didn't want to punish Abby. Often in movies, I think we're often punitive for punishment's sake. We think that that is what it is about, but that's not what it is about for me. By putting Abby through these extreme circumstances, I wanted to see what would come of it. Maybe I wanted to examine what my own next chapter might be. The story created a conversation: Where are we, and who are we in this next stage of our lives? It ends with a question: "If I belong to only you, and you don't want me...?" The acknowledgement of that question, in and of itself, is enough for me.

S2: The film is somewhat open ended —

SP: There are four things that could happen at the end of the film: Abby could get divorced; she could stay; she could keep hooking; she could stop. To the extent that Abby finds hooking rewarding, she will continue with it; to the extent that she does not, she won't. The point is, that Abby has found herself as the subject of her life. Abby doesn't feel the need to bitch to her friend about what is going on. She is not crying for help. We see all different sorts of different people in that spinning class at the gym at that point. Abby looks into the camera, as if to say, it's really none of our business. It's that sort of privacy. That should be enough for us.

S2: Does Abby have permission from her partner Kate, to do this exploration? Is Abby being open about it? Is that a moral conundrum, in your opinion?

SP: — to the extent that Abby wants to give permission to her wife, Kate, to give her permission. *CONCUSSION* is an individualist film; i.e. I am still an individual, and I still can make choices. I think that many people will find that notion alarming. There is a lot put around sex [in our society], that's not put around, for example, how we spend money or how we live and breathe. I believe that it's important that we trust Abby. (Maybe we don't.) It's important that she trusts herself in making those decisions about her needs from day to day. Wouldn't it be sad if Abby never had sex again? I think that we all need to find ways to get what we need. Everyone today is always questioning: "Do you think gays will redefine marriage?" and I'm like, "Hell yeah, they're going to completely redefine marriage — because we are not interested in living in economic prisons, and we are not interested in living in sexual prisons." I'm sorry if that messes with the foundation. I think gay men have pioneered the idea of open marriage. Men have put themselves forward sexually and said, "These are the things that I need, and I will take them." To the extent that women also feel that they need to put their sexual or even asexual needs forward, that's really interesting to me.



S2: How did you work with casting director Anne Davison, to cast the outstanding Robin Weigert in the lead?

SP: Anne Davison recommended Robin. I met Robin and immediately felt that she would be right for the role. Obviously I was unproven [as a director], so initially Robin was unsure. We started a dialogue. Robin needed to feel comfortable that we were both on the same page. Often when you write something, you don't know what it is, and Robin and my producer, Rose Troche, really

showed me what I wrote.

S2: You've commented that Robin became your mirror, that she brought things out in you that you had never seen before. How so?

SP: We would talk about what this life looked like for Abby — what living with sexuality in the center of a character, rather than to the side of a female character, looked like. Robin was ardent about making *CONCUSSION* an adult film. She was initially scared to do the film because she was concerned that it wouldn't go far enough. As a community, we've gone very, very, very conservative with our filmmaking. Robin told me to put more sex in my film — and I was clutching at my pearls. When she viewed a rough cut, Robin encouraged me, "I want to see her animal self." To put yourself in a position of vulnerability to that degree is pretty brave, in my opinion.

S2: This feature project came together exceedingly quickly. Can you walk us through the sequence of events?

SP: In March, I had a conversation with my wife about what I wanted to do. She recommended that I should probably sit down and start to write, just take it day by day. Inspired by Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, I had been thinking about what a lesbian hooker was. At the same time, I was sort-of going through a mid-life crisis. You know how sometimes you re-read things that you read when you were twenty, just to understand your inspiration? — So I started re-reading Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (Just going back to the bibles, in a way. I couldn't believe that I had put them down for that long! I needed to remind myself of how I had felt.) I re-read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*, Carrie Snodgrass' *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. And it's all there. It's — just — all — there... And I thought, there is a generation of women who don't understand any of it, who probably haven't learned anything. So I'm going to put a few things in my film almost as a spoon-feed. Pepper references throughout, markers just to say: Here we are, here we are, here we are! Seeing yourself as the subject rather than the object, seeing yourself clearly for the first time, the idea of women playing as lesbians before becoming heterosexual — I pulled those ideas down into the writing.

S2: Is it true, that you wrote the screenplay in six weeks?

SP: Yes, because each scene was infused with that message, things kept folding in, in ways that I thought, "Well, that works, and that works." Also, I don't have any sub-plots in the film. We're following this one character; I became obsessed with following Abby. I knew I was doing a dangerous thing by having no subs, one hundred and forty scenes following this one character.

S2: Who was the first person that you showed that draft to when you were finished?

SP: I showed it to my friend Julie Fain Lawrence. "Do you want this to be a sympathetic character?" she questioned. "I guess that depends on you — because I would like you to play Kate," I responded. Julie understood that she needed to be the counter-weight to Abby, to create a character who was so shut-off and shut-down, that we could make Abby a sympathetic character. I think Julie does a great job with that in the film. Somewhere I had read that I could make a film for \$60,000 — and that's completely a lie! But I figured, this is a pretty compelling subject matter, I think I'll find an investor along the way. So I just started. By the time we wrapped, we had an investor. I knew it was a huge risk, but I wasn't worried because we made the film for so little money that I was confident we could monetize it. There are all these new, great distribution platforms, so that you can make the money back in little increments over time. I thought of it as a life project.

S2: You had gained experience as a filmmaker, making commercials. How did making commercials prepare you to direct your first feature?

SP: I made media for health and beauty and music companies, 5-minute and 11-minute films, artful electronic press kits and music videos. I was approached with a task, and I would write for that task. I think that that is great prep for making a feature. You are resourceful. You put creative assets around your project. For me, *CONCUSSION* was not a precious thing. My approach was pragmatic: “Okay, I’m going to take these books, these resources, pull this down, and kind-of make it all work together.” I’m all into collaboration. I had this production company for many years, and it was interesting because my margins started to fall. You used to go out and make something for \$50-, \$60-, \$70-, \$80,000 – and now we would be making that same piece for \$10 grand. So I thought, wait a minute. Why should I be making projects for other people, when now I can make my own film for \$10,000. I felt like making my own feature became a more viable entrepreneurial risk.

S2: I think a lot of people are stopped from making their first feature because of fear of the expense. What did you do to contain costs?

SP: I am a big believer in throwing people with different skill sets into different types of jobs. I don’t believe that you necessarily need to be a professional 2nd AD proper, to work as a 2nd AD. You need to have certain administrative skills — the ability to take care of the actors, fill out forms, support the director, keep people quiet. Certainly, experience is important, but we didn’t have the luxury of experience. We had the responsibility of being able to teach. Everybody else today has to be their own assistant, everybody else needs to do six jobs — so why be precious about the way a film is made?! I don’t think that we cut corners. Every penny is on that screen.

S2: You cast your own kids –

SP: My children were cast because I didn’t want to deal with a stage mother, quite frankly. I knew that my son and my daughter were emotionally able to handle it. I was hesitant at first about sticking my kids in a lesbian, hooker film. I talked about it with my wife, my mother, and a couple of friends. “Your kids will thank you for letting them do this! Because I know you, and they will be proud of you,” a friend encouraged me. And that’s exactly what happened.

S2: Platforms for direct distribution have made it more practical than ever before, to direct a feature of one’s own. You have commented that you believe “women are more practical [than men], and that’s why they are coming into being directors now.” Can you elucidate?

SP: If our mandate is to make films for a little bit of money, we can do it. I think women really understand how to scale correctly. If your film over its entire life is only going to make X amount of dollars, then we’re going to make it for a little lower than that, plus 10 percent or something. I think women are going to redefine what being a successful filmmaker looks like. Does it mean you make \$10,000 a year, or \$50,000 a year? How do you support yourself and be a successful filmmaker Maybe you only make four films in the course of your lifetime, working eight years on each project. You know, working is important, but it’s not the only thing that you do. What do you also do? You have to gain experience. I think economists could be successful filmmakers, painters could be successful filmmakers, graphic designers could be successful – it all depends on the film you want to make.



S2: You define yourself as “someone who aspires to be brave.” What does it mean to you to be brave as an artist and in your life?

SP: It’s a watchword. There are a couple of other things that I want to be, as well. Sometimes I want to be wrong. I feel like we’ve gotten really conservative in America with filmmaking. We’re in an age where we can make any sort of film that we want. The filmmakers who I really admire are people who are just a little out of the box and a little wrong. Maybe I feel that way because I behaved in a way that was “so right” for so long. It works; you’re not distracted; you’re focused

laser-like on raising your children and having a nice life with your wife — painting the house and making sure the roof is perfect, everything is sealed and buckled. But I'm not really interested so much in that anymore. I feel like I can do that and also be a little wrong, too. A good friend once told me, "The sign of a good job opportunity is a job that just scares the crap out of you!" You're just not going to be bored with that. Part of being brave is not feeling that boredom. I'm not interested in pushing the envelope for the sake of pushing an envelope. I just want to do things that just scare the crap out of me. And so many things do — like the way we deal with sex in movies or how an artist exists in this kind of world. I think that there are a lot of things central to all of our lives and our lives beyond our borders that are really scary right now.

S2: Do you have any advice for other first time film directors?

SP: You just need to get your project to a point where it's written, then you get to a point where maybe it's in the can, then you get to the point where maybe you edit it. It's a work in progress. Don't be afraid of a work in progress. It will get finished some day. Just start and keep going. Cameras are lighter and less expensive. Adobe, Mac, Canon — they have helped spark a revolution. Some might call it the cult of amateur, but I think that also helps with representation. If you have something to say, and you say it in a confident way with these new tools, then you are going to be able to do wonderful things.

CONCUSSION is currently playing in selected theatres and is available on demand. Details [here](#) and [here](#).

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