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Director Candler and Newcomer Wiggins Turn Up The Heat in Hellion

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, July 9th, 2014

Hellion opens with an act of teenage vandalism underscored by heavy metal music. While initially you might be tempted to write off the perpetrators of such senseless violence, by the end of the picture, the very skillful director Kat Candler has drawn you into an empathetic appreciation for the two boys and their ailing father at the core of this heartbreaking drama, which is set against the backdrop of the oil refineries of the Gulf Coast of Southeast Texas.

"I'm fascinated by good kids doing bad things," explains Candler. "I wanted to give voice … to the kids that wander the small town streets in search of adventure, respect and understanding."

In the aftermath of the death of his mother, thirteen year old Jacob Wilson (Josh Wiggins) is reeling and rebellious. He has become the 'hellion' of the films title. His father, Hollis Wilson (Aaron Paul) is too preoccupied by his own grief to show much awareness or concern for the welfare of his sons, and he drowns his sorrows in the bottle. When Jacob tries to initiate his younger brother Wes (Deke Garner) into his gang of mischief-makers, Child Protective Services steps in, removing Wes from the family home and granting temporary custody to their father's sister, Aunt Pam (Juliette Lewis).

The performances of the young actors, Josh Wiggins and Deke Garner, truly stand out. Candler directs Wiggins and Garner to hold their own in scenes alongside accomplished, award-winning adult cast members, Aaron Paul (*Breaking Bad*) and Juliette Lewis (*Cape Fear, August Osage County*). The masterful sound design by Pete Horner heightens key dramatic moments to provide an emotional punch, and sucks us right into the psychology of the film's protagonist. The integration of sound and story is complete to an unusually satisfying degree. It is no surprise that *Hellion* was nominated for the Grand Jury Dramatic Prize at Sundance 2014 and won the Gamechanger Award at SXSW Film Festival 2014.

I had the opportunity to speak very briefly with director Kat Candler and actor Josh Wiggins at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco when *Hellion* screened during the San Francisco International Film Festival earlier this year.

Josh Wiggins (Jacob Wilson) in Kat Candler's "HELLION." Courtesy of Lauren Logan. Copyright Across Town Productions. An IFC Films release.

Sophia Stein: What is your personal connection to this story?

Kat Candler: The feature was born out of a short film that I wrote and directed that premiered at Sundance in 2012. It was based upon stories that my uncles and my grandfather used to tell. My Uncle Frank would always talk about how he and his two brothers set fire to my grandfather's Jeep, and what happened when my grandfather came home. Those stories made me reflect on my own parents — how they had made mistakes, but they struggled a lot as well. I came to realize that they were fallible human beings and not 'godlike figures,' as parents often seem when you are a kid growing up. I've taught filmmaking for many years to college students at the University of Texas, Austin and to teens. Early, early on, I worked as a volunteer with some at youth at risk. I have always had an affection for young people and have written about them. *Lord of the Flies* is one of my favorite books of all times. The book is about good kids doing bad things and what brings them to that place. The 1963 version of *Lord of the Flies* was my main cinematic inspiration for my short film. For the feature, to capture this world that seems frozen in time, I was inspired by films such as *Over the Edge*, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, and *Urban Cowboy*.

Sophia: How about you, Josh? What was your connection to the story as an actor?

Josh Wiggins: On the surface, Jacob looks like this totally rebellious, stupid kid. But he really does love his family, he really does love his little brother, and he doesn't want to be separated from them. I relate to him in that way because I'm very connected and close to my family. I am the second youngest of four brothers. If any one of them ever died, I would be mortified. Also, I could relate to Jacob as someone who just feels kind of alone. It's something that simple. To connect with and draw from that experience of loneliness.

Sophia: In the movie, you play an older brother who attempts to become a surrogate parent to his younger brother. What did you do to prepare to play this role?

Josh: A lot of it was just reading the script over and over and over because the script is so real. It's not fluffed up or anything. Diving into how Jacob is a good kid who's just polluted by everything that has happened in his life. He's just showing all of his layers and stuff. Kat asked us to write a two-page report describing our character's relationship with his friends, what they do together, and about their past. That's something I found really helpful.

Sophia: Kat discovered you as an actor in a series of video shorts that you and your friends had posted on YouTube. What were these videos about?

Josh: They were mostly comedies. Sometimes, there would be an action or a little zombie video. It was a really fun way to connect with people. It started off as just a fun thing to do but it evolved, and we started to take it a little more seriously. From those videos I developed my love for movies and everything else.

Sophia: Kat, what did you see in the YouTube videos that you knew that you wanted to audition Josh for this role?

Kat: There was something really natural about Josh on camera. It was very easy for him, performing. Some of the videos aren't so easy as others [big laugh], but there was just something very easy with him on screen, in front of the camera. Later on, I watched the videos that they had made when they were super-tiny, itty-bitty kids —

Josh: With high voices —

Kat: Tiny, tiny kids, all the way through to the things that he has made more recently. Watching that evolution of Josh learning how to direct, you can see the confidence and command in his filmmaking skills now.

Aaron Paul (Hollis Wilson) in Kat Candler's "HELLION."
Courtesy of Brett Pawlak. Copyright Across Town Productions. An IFC Films release.

Sophia: Josh, What did you learn about acting in film from working with Aaron Paul?

Josh: To build off of the other actors, to draw on their emotions and use it in your own way. Aaron was free to go to these deep places. Crying on camera — I had never done that before. But he made that o.k.

Sophia: The ending is absolutely heartbreaking. How did you prepare to play that moment?

Josh: I just thought of everything that Jacob had been through. He was using the race to prove himself, and the stuff he had said to his dad. It's his last resort. He doesn't want to lose his brother. He just makes it calm, becomes Zen, and he knows what he has to do.

Kat: He has the realization that his action will bring his Dad back into his younger brother's life.

Sophia: There is a scene in the film where your character holds a gun for the first time. One of Jacob's dad's friends in the scene sarcastically coos: "These are precious moments." I am curious about your personal experience with guns. I read that you are an accomplished skeet shooter?

Josh: I grew up in Texas, so we like the guns. My stepdad is a very good skeet shooter. I shoot little Clay pigeons — the high house, the low house, pull.

Sophia: What is your take on guns in the schools and the home?

Josh: There are guns in the schools. I think that the parents need to pay more attention.

Sophia: Kat, were you raised in a household with guns?

Kat: My parents had guns, but I didn't actually know about them until our house got robbed, and the guns were stolen.

Josh Wiggins (Jacob Wilson) and Deke Garner (Wes Wilson) in Kat Candler's "HELLION."
Courtesy of Brett Pawlak. Copyright Across Town Productions. An IFC Films release.

Sophia: One of my favorite scenes in the film is the scene between the little brother Wes (Deke Garner) and Aunt Pam (played by Juliette Lewis), where they are brushing their teeth getting ready for bed, and Wes tells her a joke. The way it plays out in real time, you capture something so authentic in that scene.

Kat: I had tossed out the script for that scene entirely. The boys were on set working on homework assignments, and Dylan [Cole who plays Hyder], told this joke. Deke got it pretty quickly, but it took me a while to figure it out. It became a recurring joke between me and the

boys. I decided that Deke was going to tell the joke in the scene. We just improvised it, and shot that improvisation. So Juliette Lewis didn't know what to expect, and she just rolled with it. So her reaction is authentic.

Sophia: *Hellion* is the story of the relationship between two brothers and their father. Jacob has an obsession with heavy metal and dirt-bike racing. This is a very male identified world. Kat, how did you immerse yourself in that world and mindset?

Kat: Between the fall of 2011 and the spring of 2013, I traveled to Southeast Texas a lot. I was living there at least once a month. Kelly Williams, my producer, took me all around Port Arthur. He had grown up in Port Neches, a small city along the Neches River on the Gulf Coast. I started talking to refinery workers, interviewing Child Protective Services case workers, sitting in barbershops, and listening – really taking in that world. We visited an alternative school, which is where I got the idea for the boot camp scenes. We went out with the students where they drained ditches. Then, when we were shooting, I spent a little over a month straight there in August. When I was growing up, my parents were not home a lot. That scene with the whipped cream sandwich, that is basically a scene from my childhood.

Sophia: You were awarded the Kenneth Rainin Foundation Filmmaking Grant from the San Francisco Film Society (SFFS) that enabled you to work with Skywalker Sound very early in the process. Is this a grant specifically earmarked for such collaboration?

Kat: With that grant, you must use 80% of those funds in the Bay Area. So we decided to earmark that money for post. I met with sound designer Pete Horner early on. Pete has a unique approach. We traveled together to southeast Texas and visited refineries and shipyards. He pointed out ambient sounds, like the sound of sprinklers. Most sound designers do not work with composers, but Pete spent two weeks in the Austin office working with the composer, Curtis Heath, on instrumentations and specific key emotional moments.

Sophia: What next can we expect from each of you?

Kat: I recently shot a short film, *Black Metal*, and I'm now in the screenwriting phase. My new screenplay takes place in a forest in Georgia. It's about power lines. A visionary approach. I am heading to Georgia for a week to work on it.

Josh: I've been cast in a feature film called *Max*, which is shooting in North Carolina. I play a kid whose brother is killed in Afghanistan, and his family adopts a bomb-sniffing dog.

Top Image: Josh Wiggins (Jacob Wilson) in Kat Candler's "HELLION." Courtesy of Brett Pawlak. Copyright Across Town Productions. An IFC Films release.

"Hellion" Official Website

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