

Interview with Katherine Dieckmann

If you caught *A Good Baby* recently on HBO, you saw a small story of great power: a young man, scarred by childhood trauma, awakens to love when confronted with the consequences of another family's tragedy. While hunting in the woods, Toker (Henry Thomas) stumbles across an abandoned newborn. His struggles to solve the mystery of its abandonment expose the best and the worst of his community.

You might also have noticed, even through the video screen, the stunningly beautiful cinematography, which evokes the lyrical in a North Carolina hill landscape in springtime. Your ears probably perked up to hear fresh interpretations of classic folk music.

Director Katherine Dieckmann's debut fiction feature is a rare achievement in independent film, consistently rescuing experience from cliché. Dieckmann, who began her career by working as a film and literary critic, has made several music videos and co-developed the ground breaking children's program "The Adventures of Pete & Pete" for Nickelodeon, and teaches advanced screen writing at Columbia University.

She spoke with Center Director Pat Aufderheide about how she launched the five-year-long project, how she attracted name actors, and what she learned about directing.

How did you decide to do this story?

I first read the book when I was doing a column on paperback books for *The Village Voice*. I remember at the time I was renting a farmhouse in Pennsylvania, and I sat up in bed and read it in one sitting. The novel is very different from what I ended up doing with it, but the essential story of a guy who is reclusive and is opened up emotionally by the baby was very appealing. Also there was the fateful sense of good and evil.

It's also a part of the country you don't see that much, although you will more soon. There's Maggie Greenwald's movie, *Song Catcher*, which is also opening in December, and was shot very close to where *A Good Baby* was shot near Asheville, North Carolina. Also her husband David Mansfield scored both our films, as well as films like *The Apostle* and *Tumbleweed*. And when they do *Cold Mountain*, you'll see that part of North Carolina again.

Were you concerned about the stereotyping of Appalachian culture that seems so endemic to American media?

I was very conscious of the *Deliverance* prototype, and absolutely determined not to go down that road. I think there are thoughtful, positive images. [Rory Kennedy's documentary] *American Hollow* is a grittier version of what I was up to. My film by contrast is a bit of a fable. I've been concerned about snarky attitudes toward regional people for some time. As a critic I wrote a piece for *The Voice* in the mid '80s about irony in Americana movies, when *True Stories* and *Raising Arizona* had come out and David Letterman was on the rise. So I was very impatient seeing tons of movies about New York and LA hipsters, and equally impatient about movies making fun of the "little folk" and their wacky ways.

Did you work with local people to allay their concerns?

Certainly when we went to Sandy Marsh, a tiny valley half an hour from Asheville, people there

were very conscious of those stereotypes and worried about a bunch of New Yorkers coming down to make a movie in their world. We made friends with someone in the community, who became a liaison with people there, someone who had read the script and could assure people there was no disrespect. We hired a few people to work, rented the community center and paid location fees.

We were there at the tail end of a moment. There were some people in that community who had never been off the mountain, and never seen television. But you also could see yuppie people from Asheville noticing that it was a beautiful place to build a house. In the course of shooting, a huge house was going up in the valley, and in the scene when Toker was seeing the baby for the first time we had to change the blocking because there was a house in the shot.

What kind of challenges did you face in shooting in such a remote location?

Access was a problem. There was one, very steep mountain road with hairpin turns in and out of that valley. We also were shooting in one of the rainiest springs on record in Asheville. Sometimes I felt we were making a Herzog movie, *Aguirre, Wrath of God* or something. We were very wet a lot of the time. Electricity was not always available; we brought in generators.

How did you get such a remarkable cast?

David Strathairn was the first person who committed. I've been a huge fan of his from the Sayles movies and the other kind of work he'd done. One of the producers, Lianne Halfon, who produced *Crumb*, had worked with Steppenwolf and had connections to David, so we went to him directly. He and I met, and he really loved the script. He had just done *Dolores Claiborne*, and was unhappy with being a cartoon heavy, so I think the subtlety was appealing. And the regionalism too—he's drawn to that kind of project. He was just unbelievably loyal to me on the project, attached the whole time over three or four years. He is as princely as one would imagine. He knows every crew member's name, he stays on the mountain till one in the morning to take the equipment down, and really elevates the mood of the company.

As for Toker, I had another actor attached to the role for years, Jeremy Davies, and then in 1996 I went to the Sundance filmmakers' lab, and Jeremy was making a movie at the time and couldn't come. I can't say enough to any aspiring filmmaker, try to get to the Lab. You get a chance to rehearse what you'll shoot, and you get amazing people to critique it for you.

Anyway, I had to cast someone, and I cast Henry. I had seen him in a Sam Shepard movie, and loved him in that. We worked together on the part at the Lab, and I loved what he was doing. Then as it turned out Jeremy backed out, probably a year later. I immediately wanted Henry. I was under some pressure to cast a bigger name, and none of that worked out. In the end I was thrilled to have him, and beyond thrilled when I saw what he brought to the part. He did it in a very unfussy, unshowy, private way. He just did it. I remember vividly the last day of filming. We were doing the last scene inside the root cellar, and I just started weeping, partly because he was so beautiful in the scene, but also because I realized I would never see that character again, except by watching the movie.

Looking through the credits, there are many remarkable names, both above and below the line.

I really lucked out with this group, because the level of professionalism was very high. Cara Seymour is an English actress I had seen in a Mike Leigh play. She worked very hard on the

accent and it was also her first film role. She since has been in *Dancer in the Dark* and *American Psycho*. Jayne Morgan, who plays the storekeeper, had auditioned when we were trying to get a name in that role—you're always trying to get a name—and when she did a table reading everyone was just blown away by her, she owned that part.

Our cinematographer, Jim Denault, who shot *Boys Don't Cry*, is very intuitive and exacting. We shared a lot of aesthetic affinities, loving Russian cinema, the same kind of music, the same photographers. I never showed Jim a single frame of anything I had shot before, but if you look at my videos, *A Good Baby* is completely in line with them. We worked in a very improvisational way, because the weather was so bad. Debbie De Villa the production designer, had worked on *Ulee's Gold*. I loved her interiors in that film, and chose her for that. Kathryn Nixon, the costume designer, had done *Happiness*. Both are total fetishists for detail, which is what I wanted. The two of them had a strong stylistic affinity, which is what you want. Kathryn went to great lengths to find the right brown polyester for David's suit. And for Debbie the work was a lot of scouring the area and me insisting on more plastic. That's something that people don't always notice, as they get caught up in the beauty of weathered wood. The aesthetic of the region comes out of poverty and necessity. There are these beautiful old buildings and when the window goes out the corrugated plastic goes in. There are plastic buckets and plastic decorations.

This project seems very different from your earlier work on music videos.

Well, all my music videos were like short films and that's why I was never a very commercial director. I made a video for Vic Chestnutt for \$6,000 in Athens, Georgia, and that was shot a lot like *A Good Baby*. I always had an interest in Southern architecture and landscape. I was a Southern fiction fanatic in high school, in Ithaca, New York. Musically I loved all that Appalachian music. In photography, I've been obsessed with Walker Evans, and William Eggleston.

For this film I did a lot of research into Appalachian music. I was heavily influenced by traditional songs, by murder ballads in particular, which is a big part of the musical history of the area. If you listen to those ballads they practically tell the story of this movie. There's a lot of stuff about babies, death, murder, hauntedness. At one point I was going to use one in the film—Anjelica Huston actually did use one of those ballads in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. But it was out of synch with the time period, because I wanted it to be set in the seventies. I used two songs by Gillian Welch, a contemporary singer songwriter who works in the old Southern vein. Then I went to David Mansfield, and he played every instrument in that score except the cello himself.

What skills do you think carried over from your earlier work, and what did you have to learn on the job?

I think the skills I brought with me had to do with a strong interest in character driven drama, which are the kind of films I've always responded to. Most recently I think of *You Can Count on Me*, which is a movie I wish I had made, and that's a feeling that doesn't happen to me very often. I loved Terrence Malick's first two films, *Days of Heaven* and *Badlands*. I saw *Days of Heaven* in high school and it probably changed my life more than anything else, in the sense of wanting to be a director. The languorousness of it, the attention to landscape, the lyrics, the terseness. I was also influenced in *A Good Baby* by a film not too many people know, *Tomorrow*, made in 1971. It was possibly Robert Duvall's best performance ever. It's set in Mississippi, based on a Faulkner story with a script by Horton Foote. That movie also hugely influenced *Slingblade*.

In terms of what I had to learn, I had never really worked with actors outside my children's show. The hardest thing is what an actor needs, and what the director does and doesn't need to give them. I learned that my three actors needed very different things from me, and I had to communicate with them in very different ways to get what I wanted. I think the fact that I had just had a baby helped, to help me be selfless in the way you have to be as a director. That also helped in working with the baby.

How did you balance the work of shooting with early motherhood?

I had a nanny, and my daughter was at a great age for it. I credited the woman who took care of her in the film credits, because as any mother will tell you, you cannot do a good job if you don't have good child care.

How did you find the "good baby" in the film?

We started shooting the film with boy twins, and when we got back the first dailies, I said, These guys aren't emanating, and besides I feel like I can tell they're boys in a pink suit. They weren't working, and we were already filming. We were panicked. We put an ad in the local Asheville paper and this couple came in on a Sunday with this baby, she was exactly the right age, the right size, a radiant kid, with an uncanny ability to focus. To get some of those expressions I would hold a mirror up to the lens, and her mother would sing to her next to the camera.

How was it financed?

For financing, we needed patience. My film came together and fell apart at least twice before we shot it. It was an independent producer, Tom Caruso, who really really believed in my vision and saw that through. It was all privately financed through his contacts. And I have to add that my producers, Tom Caruso and Lianne Halfon completely supported my take on the film, did not intrude on what I wanted to do, which I think is both rare and great. Lianne completely developed the project with me—she came in when it was just a treatment and I was a novice screenwriter. I met her when she was a producer in LA; we had a mutual friend who thought Lianne would like it.

How is A Good Baby reaching audiences?

It's on HBO now. We took it to festivals, which was great. The highlight for me was going to the Edinburgh festival. An 80-year-old lady stood up and said, "Good art will get you higher than the best crack cocaine!" But I think you shouldn't get your expectations too high about what festivals can do, except for Sundance, Toronto and Cannes. And we didn't go to those. Without them, I think your chances of theatrical distribution are slim. One thing that process taught me is how hostile the climate is for films without edge, whether the edge is teen violence or sex or drugs or urban setting or whatever. HBO bought it finished, and the reaction has been very heartening. I think what most surprises me is how much men like the movie, because it's all about emotion. Maybe it's because you never see a maternal impulse in men represented in film.

What's next?

Artisan has hired me to write and direct a fiction feature about the Shaggs, a cult, all-girl 1960s rock band. That has plenty of built-in edge. I'm deliriously happy about it, and about halfway through the screenplay.