

Interview with Tamlin Hall – Director/Screenwriter – *Holden On*

Interview conducted October 15, 2017 at Rock da Casbah restaurant, Saugerties, NY by Brian Shaer (The 4th Reel)

Holden On was featured as part of the 2017 Woodstock Film Festival

Brian Shaer: Going along with what you were talking about just now about some of your favorite classes in screenwriting being in critical studies, what sort of knowledge from those classes or influences from those classes did you take to *Holden On* to develop your style? It really was a beautifully visual film.

Tamlin Hall: I was taking a European cinema class and Michael Haneke is somebody I fell in love with who did *Funny Games* and *Code Unknown* and *Caché*. He's one of the, I feel like, most talented filmmakers. He just kind of is a fly on the wall, but he also is very, very, very I would say probably the most efficient at blocking. He can find things in one frame where the characters are coming in and out of the frame and finding the negative space and finding where the x and the y axis are and that was something that we, the DP and I on *Holden On*, really talked about beforehand: blocking the scenes because blocking is so critical. Any time you do stage, you're blocking. It's just part of it and actors, they move, and that's one thing that I, coming from an acting background, bothers me. I'm an actors' director and it bothers me when people say actors are props because they're not. They're human beings. We can move a cardboard box over or a table, but actors you have to communicate through language and it's heart to heart and you have to understand each other. Whenever you start blocking, you have to give it over to them as well as the scene that you want to take place. The beginning, middle, and the end, when the actors start to find that space with what you are working with, it comes into this harmony of this kinetic response where you can shoot things in a one. I'm not needing to get coverage all the time and I love to explore what's outside of the frame. What's the negative space out there and how can we pull that in because in *Holden On*, it's the auditory noises and the voices and being able to pull that in. I would say that filmmaker is really one of my inspirations.

BS: It's interesting because he's sort of known for pulling the rug out from under the audience like in *Funny Games*. That's an interesting person to draw inspiration from. I took a class on Kubrick over the summer and, of course, he was famous for doing hundreds of takes, put Shelly Duvall through hell. You know what I mean? Poor thing. What was your working methodology? Do you believe in rehearsals?

TH: Yes. Hundreds of takes.

BS: Really?

TH: I would say that Matt [Fahey] and I, we worked together for six months beforehand on my rocking chairs. We would sit there and we would go over the

script, every scene, beat for beat, line for line, word for word, and then we'd start doing movements and gestures, creating this behavior inside this character, giving him homework. We really kind of were developing all of that ... I just started rambling. What the hell were you talking about?

BS: Kubrick takes.

TH: Oh, yes. Matt and I gelled very well together. He listened to me, I listened to him, and if he had an idea, I'd take it. And if it wasn't what I was digging, I would say, "Dude." I was like, "Let's give you a couple. Let's see how it goes. And then if it's not working out, then we're gonna do what Tamlin wants to do." When Holden's leaving the house and there's the weed and he basically gets forced out of the house. "Either you live by our rules or you can't live here." We shot that, that was three and a half hours. We did about 30-something masters. It was not working at all. We had rehearsed it before lunch. Everything was rocking and then we took lunch, then we came back, and it always, and we don't realize this, that when you're working in the arts, everybody has to be connected.

BS: It's a dance. Yeah, absolutely.

TH: It's a dance. Maybe it was being a younger director, feeling like you just always have to be a hundred percent. Where sometimes people, they are not gonna give that hundred percent. I always feel like, well, if we have that, then what else can we get when we go in.

BS: It's interesting that it was a very technical process because from my perspective in the film everybody gave such natural performances. They really were beautiful performances. Not just from Matt, but I was looking at the father and the mother.

TH: What I learned as an actor is that in order to represent a strong performance, you have to give over to the actor. So some of these performances, we actually kind of played into that person's character traits and just who they are in real life. Greg Thompson, who plays Bob, he's a very caring, very sensitive guy and we played into his natural traits in order to get that very strong performance that's so real and it's not over the top. It's there and it's raw, and it's visceral.

BS: You know, one of the interesting things, speaking about Bob, was ... And to some extent, the mother. I forget the character.

TH: Kelly.

BS: Kelly.

TH: Brenda.

BS: Brenda. Well, the character name, whatever.

TH: Yes, Brenda.

BS: Okay. It was interesting that there were so many times Holden really put his parents through hell and you never ... The mother I think maybe a little bit, but you never saw the father, at least I didn't, correct me if I'm wrong, I never saw tears. You could tell he was on the verge, but he never cried and I wonder ... I was thinking during the film, I'm like, was that a conscious choice to maybe show the masculine aspect of it or was that just an actorly choice?

TH: We cut out a scene, it's his alone scene and he's kind of broken down and he's at rock bottom and he's alone and he kind of just let's it all out in his car. We just decided that we didn't feel like we needed that in terms of the response of what the audience would think about that scene because if we play into that and that's that moment, then that moment has to be on. It has to be an A+++ moment and if you feel that you've done such a strong job throughout creating and developing this character and his arc and do we need that? Or do we not need that? It was a risk. It was one of those we can put it in and take a risk or we can leave it out and take a risk and we decided to leave it out.

BS: Sometimes the most effective and the most powerful moments are the ones that are intimated and not literalized.

TH: We actually recut that scene, the three and a half hour take scene with Holden leaving the house, because I just wasn't happy with it. I knew going in that was our audition scene, callback scene. That was one of those scenes that, that was it. That's gonna be a strong scene and when we shot it, I just, I said to myself, I was like, "You know, we're gonna really have to edit this and figure out some ways into this thing." We had cut it, I think, three times and I still wasn't happy and I went to my editor and I was like, "Dude, we gotta do ... I just want one more." And that was when we found when Holden leaves the house, that moment of the mom and the dad looking at each other and he almost broke. That was when the tears were very close and his eyes were red and they connected.

BS: Yeah, I think that's what I'm referring to, yeah. Or the prison scene.

TH: And the prison scene. But that was something, that finding those moments that the parents connected alone together because they don't do that very much and that was something that I felt tied that scene together and buttoned it up nicely.

BS: It amazes me that as a first time filmmaker you can make these connections between these scenes and these characters that ... It takes people a lot of skill and a lot of experience to be able to do that so you must be very proud that you can do that just right off the bat.

TH: No, I'm really proud. When I sat there and I talked in the Q and A [at the Woodstock Film Festival screening on October 15, 2017] about we don't feel worthy enough, talented enough, there's all these sensors that go why we're not gonna do ... That was something that really worried me and I really hesitated telling anybody this is my first film because as soon as I say that people go, "Really?" And it becomes that question mark of like you're not good enough. Not a question mark of good for you. It's that like, "Really? It's a feature film. Really? It's a true story? Really? It's about real people? Are you sure you're ... "

I kind of leaned against ever saying that at all until it was done because I knew in my heart that I believed in myself and I knew what I could do and I feel like actors come first and I'm an actors' director. I feel like I equate it sometimes to sports in a way. I watch college football and I think like a head coach, you have to defer things to your assistant coaches and your department heads and that's one thing that I really gave freedom and trust to is that I don't know everything and I will never claim to know everything. I have to have trust in my team that they're gonna lead their department in the right way and they're gonna communicate with me.

Of course, at the end of the day I'll say yes or no, but it's a team effort and that's what the beauty of what we are able to do is collaborate and become a family because of that. Because there was no ego, there was no, "It's my way or the highway." It's like, "Let's come together for a solution," because anytime you do a low-budget anything, you gotta have a team. You've gotta communicate. It can't be your way or the highway because there is no way it will ever happen.

BS: Just switching gears for one second, your communication with Holden's family. When you came to them and asked for the project, was there any sort of, "Oh, you're just a kid who's interested in film that wants to make a home movie about our son. You're not a Spielberg. You're not ... " Was there any sort of trepidation on their part?

TH: I can't speak for them of what they thought the outcome was gonna be, but I would know that they had no idea what they were getting into and they were just saying yes to whatever that yes was and then really not knowing that in a number of years they're gonna be on a film festival circuit and they're gonna be going to cities across the country speaking to people. They didn't know that. They just thought, "Okay. Well, it's a film and I don't know what that is." Bob Layfield was on set for five days and he got to really see how to make a film and he was enthralled. He called me after we wrapped, not to congratulate. He'd start calling me up and he would go, "Tamlin, so I was thinking, how are you guys gonna shoot this to this, " and he started getting the technical part of filmmaking because he was there and it intrigued him so much. He became passionate about making a film.

BS: So now he's working at Lucasfilm, right? *(laughter)*

TH: Yes. So now he's like a filmmaker himself. *(laughter)*

BS: That's nice.

TH: Yeah, but it's really cool that they were able to be a part of it and they said yes. There were certain scenes that I said, "No, we can't have you on set with that," but the stuff in Holden's bedroom ... I remember distinctly, Bob Layfield brought his brother to set with him and he was on monitor and after one scene, we were moving on to the next and he just kind of pulls me aside and he goes, "Matt's Holden." Like his gestures, the way that he held his arms behind him and the way that he sat Indian style and the way that he held the phone. There were so many behavioral things that all of a sudden he became Holden and even his dad, Holden's real dad, had that moment of, "Am I watching my son?" And it's powerful.

BS: It's extraordinarily powerful. You can't really ask when you're doing a true story for a reaction better than that.

TH: Like I said earlier with it, we shot in Holden's hometown, shot in the same high school and the football field.

BS: Lent it the air of authenticity.

TH: We just wanted to be authentic and we wanted to be authentic not only with the film and the production, but with me and my voice. I had gotten a lot of notes before we started shooting this film from mental health professionals, and film industry professionals of what I should do with the script and how I should change this and that and there were some things that I definitely listened to. Some professional script readers wanted to kind of demonize the parents because that's what we do. It creates conflict and tension and then we blame the parents for the demise of the son and then that's how that works and I said, "That's not gonna happen with my story. Maybe the audience won't think that there's enough conflict and tension with that, but these people love their son." There are so many people out there that love their children and things like this happen to them. We have to honor those people and those stories because they're out there. They're not just a whole bunch of demonized parents that this is happening to. It's parents that really love and care and would do anything for their children.

We like to show all the Hollywood, the good, and the Hollywood ending, but also the stuff that's just real and it's truthful ... and there's hope through tragedy. That was my goal and to be able to have an ending that really showed the consequences of his actions because I think one thing that's really strong with our film is that Holden is not a victim. He's a protagonist that's making his choices. He's making his choices. He's not allowing anyone else to do that. He's constantly making choices and those lead to other choices and other actions. It was his choice and I can't take that away. And I can't take that away from

anybody who has done that and honoring those people and we sit on a fence, we just tell the story, and we're truthful.

BS: I was talking to Matt's father outside [of the theater at the screening Tamlin and I attended at the Woodstock Film Festival] while we were waiting for you to come out and one of the things that we both noticed about the film, or I did at least, was that it's hard to put an uplifting kind of spin on a film that ends in a suicide and you managed to do that. I think it had a lot to do with the script and it had a lot to do with the way you told the story and not making Holden a victim, like you said. Speaking of Holden, Matt was ... What a find! What a find!

TH: It's unbelievable that this young man came from *Awkward* on MTV to make a performance that is to be revered for years and years and years.

BS: It really is. How have you found the reaction from educational institutions and mental health institutions across the country?

TH: We had a screening in Louisville, Kentucky. We had some really heavy hitters in Louisville at the screening and it was the first time that we've ever really done a screening just for the mental health field.

I will say that probably one thing that I will take to my grave is that this lady stood up and she looked at the mental health providers that were in the room. It was about 200 people, it was very intimate, and it was incredible and she said that she has lived with a mental illness for most of her whole life and that you cannot put everybody who has a mental illness in a box and you can't diagnose them the same way and everybody's an individual and that she feels alone and trapped and so often in her life all she's doing is just holding on, and she sits back down. I said, "Man, we just did it." In my head, I said, "Man, we just did it." I won't ever forget she used our name, she used the title of the film in what she was about to tell all of these people in this room and it was a cry for help and it was saying like, this is it. This is the film that is going to help us. And I said, "Man, we're doing our job."

BS: You are and I know you can understand this as an artist. I think you would agree that part of the purpose of art is to evoke this sort of reaction in people where they can change their lives, change their viewpoints, change their outlooks. That's sort of the ... at least what I believe is sort of the purpose of art whether it be a film or...

TH: And I'll say this, too, one of the professionals there was an art therapist. We've done something that is just service oriented. It's not for money, it's not for fame, it's not for anything other than servicing the world, touching one person that touches somebody else, it touches somebody else. That pay it forward, that we can create some social shift here and start to help these young people and adults and everybody. And I think that is super, just rad, that we're doing that. And it was like, "Wow, that's cool."

BS: I think that's a good place to end, but I really, sincerely wanna congratulate you. You've made a beautiful film and you've made it with care that comes through very clearly in the film from the way it's directed, to the performances, to the presentation of the story. It's really amazing what you're exposing people to about mental illness and suicide and prevention and the humanity behind the film. It's really very, very admirable and I'm very proud to know you and I wish you all the best luck with this film.

TH: Thanks, man. That's awesome.

BS: My pleasure.

TH: Thank you.