

KURT KUENNE REVEALS HIS FAVOURITE DOCUMENTARY

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"Nobody's Business" (1996) -- Alan Berliner

In 2000, I had just been hired to make my first documentary ("Drive-In Movie Memories", 2001), and one night while I was watching PBS, I stumbled across an interview with a filmmaker named Alan Berliner...and when clips of his work came on screen, I was mesmerized by his cutting and sound design. I immediately set about tracking down copies of his work (which was not easy in 2000, before the advent of Netflix, where almost all of his work is now streaming) -- and I found them on VHS at Vidiots in Santa Monica. I loved all of his films, but was particularly taken with "Nobody's Business" (1996).

"Nobody's Business" is an hour-long interview with Alan Berliner's father, Oscar, who does not want to be interviewed and would rather be anywhere else. Alan conducted the interview in order to set down and clear up questions about his family history -- which doesn't immediately sound like it would be of interest to a general audience, but his use of surgically precise cutting, textures and sound effects create an almost musical audio/visual rhythm that turn it into an aesthetic feast that occasionally rises to the level of poetry. And Oscar is such a sincere, honest, endearing, funny and irascible character that you come to like him immediately. You're drawn into the relationship between these two and the emotional conflict at the center of the interview. It ultimately develops into a very moving film, a tribute from a son to his father -- even though the father doesn't want the tribute. It's all the more moving since Oscar Berliner's passing in 2001.

Alan Berliner saw "Drive-In Movie Memories" after it premiered at the Telluride Film Festival in 2001, liked it and he agreed to meet me for lunch when I was passing through New York City on my cross-country trek to Canada to meet baby Zachary in June 2003, shooting the project that eventually became "Dear Zachary". I originally intended that project to be a memory album about my late

friend Andrew for friends and family only. When I told him the story of what was going on, he found it such a compelling story that he suggested I consider crafting the tale of what was really happening into a documentary for a general audience and release it publicly; I told him there was no way I would ever do that, as our paramount concern was to make sure Zachary had the best chance for a normal, happy life. Putting his family conflict all over the media would serve no purpose, and likely cause him great pain as he grew up. Alan understood. But by the end of that summer, enormous tragedy befell us and the situation became radically different. When I told Alan of the tragedy, he wrote to me, "This changes everything, but a film (a different kind of film, of course) is now more necessary than ever." And I eventually ended up making the very film he suggested I make at our lunch that day, which we used as a tool to argue for change to the Canadian criminal code, at which we finally succeeded in 2010.

Alan's work showed me that the emotional life of an ordinary, unknown family could be compelling to strangers. The influence of his cutting style and sound design can be felt in "Drive-In Movie Memories", "Dear Zachary" and even "Batkid Begins", which I just finished. There's a treasure trove waiting there for those who have yet to discover him; I encourage everyone to check out Alan Berliner's films, but start with "Nobody's Business".