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INTERVIEW

Do-It-(All-) Yourself Filmmaker Kurt Kuenne

The director/writer/composer of *Dear Zachary* knows how to make an impact

Kuenne, left



By Steve Heisler January 28, 2009

In 2001, filmmaker Kurt Kuenne received the tragic news that his childhood friend, Andrew Bagby, had been killed at the age of 28; it also turned out that Bagby's much older girlfriend Shirley Turner, the suspected murderer, was pregnant with the couple's child. Twenty-four hours later, Kuenne decided to pick up his camera and set off on a cross-country journey to capture memories of Bagby, as told by his closest friends and family, in the hopes that the boy would know his father after all. But as the case against Turner played out in the courts, Kuenne suddenly had a different, more public story to tell. His film *Dear Zachary: A Letter To A Son About His Father* (which Kuenne directed, produced, and scored) is, in a word, beautiful—a disarmingly honest portrayal of Bagby and his loved ones. The independent documentary just might be one of the best films of 2008; if only more people would see it. Thankfully, Chicago seems to be on the ball, as the film's week-long stint last year at the **Gene Siskel Film Center** saw sold-out crowds—it will begin its return engagement Friday night.

Many believe the twists and turns of this tale are best experienced **sans spoilers**, so **if the previous paragraph piqued your interest, please *don't* read on to experience the doc fresh** (though the events have already been captured in the news long ago). For everyone else, here's *The A.V. Club's* chat with Kuenne about, well, spoilers. Don't say we didn't warn you.

The A.V. Club: Almost every single review or interview about the film includes a spoiler alert. What is it like promoting a film when you know people are purposely avoiding spoilers?

Kurt Kuenne: Well, that's a weird thing, because when I was in the last stage of making the film, that never really occurred to me. The entire point of making the film was to get people to know what happened, to change things. So originally, that concept [of avoiding spoilers] was brought up by both my sales rep and the distributors, like, "Oh, the movie's much more effective if you don't know anything about it." At first, I got a little bit annoyed. I was like, "I made this movie to get this stuff out there, and now you want me to *not* talk about it?" About a year ago I was instructed to, "not give away the ending," which always sounded kind of crass to talk about the events of your own life and plot twists.

AVC: You originally didn't make the film to be released theatrically.

KK: I didn't start editing 'til March 2007, so I had been putting the movie together in my head for a long time. But I originally was just going to make a tribute movie about Andrew for him, and also for family and friends. But, when he was taken out of the picture and suddenly my film's audience wasn't living anymore, I kind of put the movie away for a year. Then I noticed that Andrew's folks started speaking out in support of changing Canada's bail system. [*The Bagbys believe the faulty system enabled Shirley to escape swifter justice—ed*] And I wanted to do something helpful in that front, too, because I was just as furious as they were. While I was interviewing people, I was asking a lot of questions about Shirley, and I remember a lot of them asking, "Why are you asking about her?" And I said, "I don't know, but I just think it's important to have a record down—even if I don't put it in the movie—of everyone else's side of the story, because I'm sure when he gets older, his mom will still be around and in jail. And he'll see her and she'll probably tell him a lot of stuff that's not true," which she did a lot. [Laughs.]

AVC: You've said you refused to show Shirley's side of things because you believe the media has an obsession with delving into the

mind of killers.

KK: Yeah, and my feeling is: What difference would it make to hear about her side of the story? There's no reason that anyone's going to come up with that makes it okay to gun an innocent man down like a dog because he doesn't want to date you. [Laughs.] I mean, it's not okay to dunk and drown a helpless child. There's no side of the story anyone could possibly come up with to justify that action, so why ask?

AVC: One of the most striking things is that when you're narrating the facts of Andrew's murder, you begin to well up. How did that part come about?

KK: The way I recorded the narration is, I just set up Zachary's picture and talked to him for however long it took to get through the narration. And trying to sit there and describe to this little boy what was done to his dad—I couldn't get through it any other way, and I tried. [Laughs.] I went back over it and I was like, "Shit, I can't do this part!" And then I was just like, screw it, leave it in, because it reminds the audience that the person making this movie gives a damn. Also, it kind of evens the playing field a little bit with some of Andrew's friends who were not terribly thrilled at the idea of being seen crying on camera. [Laughs.] I was like—you know what? If I broke down, I should probably put it in the movie to show Peter and other people, hey, I'm not just showing *you* get emotional.

AVC: Is it possible for anyone to hate this movie?

KK: I've found little posts and things around the Internet—that's when I stopped looking. [Laughs.]

AVC: What's their complaint?

KK: You know, like, "This sucked!" The average thought that goes into a hateful post on a message board... I did read one review some place—and it was the only bad review that we got from an actual critic or whatever somewhere online—that said this movie would be of no interest to anyone that didn't know the subject and that it shouldn't be released to the public, because why should the rest of us care? And I thought, Well, that's fine if you're not interested. But... that's patently untrue. [Laughs.]

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