

Larry Clark (Part Two)

The director of *Marfa Girl* and *The Smell of Us* marvels at the improv of James Woods, blasts a prominent critic (or two), and talks Cab Calloway

It's interesting to look at *Marfa Girl* and *The Smell of Us* side by side. *The Smell of Us* is maybe the most stylistically radical thing that you've ever done, while *Marfa Girl* certainly does have that improvisatory quality about it but still sticks to the basic tenets of psychological realism. *The Smell of Us* is something else again, in terms of characters being where they logically should not actually be, or these jagged little scenes that pop up where you leave it to a viewer to connect them to the rest of the story, or not. Like when we see Rockstar getting the matching tattoo with Math...

I liked Lukas's tattoo—he had this little skull on his finger and I liked it, so I got that. I got this in the film... [shows skull tattoo on arm] and then I got this [shows two skull tattoos on finger]. The first one I got looking that way, and when I look at it, it's upside-down to me, so then I had a second one on so I could see it too. So I have two. And then I got the one on my finger, which I get complimented on all the time by old people, young people, bus drivers. I'm playing Rockstar, but the way Rockstar was written, he walks around saying kind of gibberish poetry and I'm not an actor and I didn't want to do that anyway. So I figured out with Michael... Michael Pitt. I just turned 73, so my mind's going a bit, but I'm fine. Maybe the movies'll get better as my mind gets hazier.

Michael Pitt helped me with the character Rockstar. We both figured that I was strongest with just my "Larry Clark look." Rockstar doesn't talk in the film, and my idea was that he can talk but he just doesn't choose to. He's not mute at all, he can talk, and he actually sings John Lee Hooker with the guy playing the baby tuba. The tuba player is just a guy who would come to the street I lived on at midnight playing the tuba, and I would give him coins. I ran out and grabbed him one night to get his info because I wanted him to be in the film, just to have a tuba player in the movie.

Mathieu Landais wasn't in Paris—he lives in Nantes and would come to Paris, but during the shooting he wasn't there, and I had to improvise. I didn't want a screenwriting credit either, I said: "Don't give me a credit for writing," but they did anyways, so now it's written by Mathieu and myself because, as I said, we had to make up a lot of the film on the fly. And it's a much better film for it. The script was good but wasn't great. That happens in some films. I'm to the point where I can take a screenplay, and even if it's not very good, if I'm interested in something that's going on, I know when I make the film that I'm going to change it to make it the way I want to. So I'm always doing that, I'm always looking for something that I can improv on, if I think of something I'll just do it right then and will improv it.

Probably the one film that really people thought there was a lot of improv in was *Kids*. There's not. It was written: Harmony wrote the words and I insisted the actors say the words and I wouldn't let them improvise, because I figured they couldn't improvise anyway. They couldn't; improv is not easy to do. Some actors can do it and are great at it and some actors can't do it at all, they're totally lost. If you don't tell them "Stand here and say this," they're lost. The only improv in *Kids* is the four boys on the couch. We were shooting the party scene and these three of these kids came from California, they smoked a joint and improvised it. It's a good scene that was spur-of-the-moment improv, but everything else in *Kids* was scripted, word for word. Same with *Ken Park*, which Harmony wrote from my diaries—I don't think there was any improv in *Ken Park*.

The one film that had a lot of improv is *Another Day in Paradise* [98] because Jimmy [James Woods] was so good at improv—he's fuckin' the best, the best I've ever seen at improv. We would start doing a scene as written, and there's like one sentence out of the scene, one little piece of scene that worked, and I said: "Start there and then improv." And that was the challenge to Melanie [Griffith], Melanie did not want to improv at all. And Vincent Kartheiser and Natasha Gregson Wagner, Jimmy kind of forced them into it, like a challenge, and they would get more and more into it and tried to top each other.

There are a couple of scenes in *The Smell of Us* that really threw me. The scene where Math wakes up with a hard-on, Cab Calloway is on the TV, and he goes to the shower and puts the shower head to his dick—

He's pissed off. Mathieu wakes up and he was pissed off that he had a hard-on and he puts cold water on it to make it go down. It was all connected to what his character was doing, sexually. He wasn't enjoying it. And that was what it was for. I don't think the audience has to understand it, it's a good scene. I showed the film to someone the other night, about eight people, they knew nothing about the film so they're seeing it cold... and I thought: "Man, I wonder if anybody understands this scene?" But it's a good scene, it doesn't make any difference. And the Cab Calloway! I was so happy that it turned on people to Cab Calloway, because when I showed it to these guys the other night, who were all in their twenties, they were knocked out by Cab Calloway. I said: "This is from the Forties." They said: "This was the first guy to do rock 'n' roll. Look at him dance!" And they realized that things that are going on now were going on, like, 70 years ago. Something had to be on the TV and we had to get rights very cheap, and I had two choices: some terrible old cartoon or Cab Calloway. Wow! So I let it play for a long time. I let you see Cab Calloway for a couple of minutes, a long time.

There's some crossover influence from the fashion world in *The Smell of Us* as well, which you've have had in films before. Janice Dickinson and Jeremy Scott are in *Wassup Rockers*, for example, and here you have a cameo from Diane Pernet, and Natalia Brilli is credited as the production designer.

That's right. She's an artist, she's really good. She does a lot of great stuff. She made me a leather skateboard, one of a kind, it's incredible. Anyway, the fashion thing was really because of the character of Marie, Diane Rouxel's character. We wanted to show her going back into that world, the fashion scene. And I thought if we're going to have a fashion show, we ought to shoot it in Fashion Week. It's got to be real, y'know? We actually shot that before we made the movie. We shot it then, because Fashion Week was three weeks before we started shooting. We shot the fashion scene and then made the movie weeks later. That was the first shot we got, actually.

The Rad Hourani show, all the unisex stuff?

Yeah. Luckily it was good, with the masks and everything. It just worked out.

Marie says something along the lines of: "It's 2013, everyone's gay." Do you think there's been a change in sexual identity, or a certain new fluidity, among these kids?

Mathieu Landais wrote the line. She says everybody's gay and Toff says, "Not me," and she says, "Are you sure?" Mathieu wrote that, and that was the scene. Me being me, just before we're ready to shoot it, I think to myself: "What if she asks him if he wants a blowjob?" I took her aside and asked her to say that, and I didn't tell the kid, Terin Maxime. So she said my improv line, and you can see the look on his face when he goes: "Yeah." It was great. It was real, a real scene. I'm sure all directors tell one actor something to do and don't tell the other actors because they want a true reaction. In *Another Day in Paradise*, James Woods slapped Vincent Kartheiser out of nowhere. They're arguing out in the woods, the scene where Jimmy's trying to shoot a whisky bottle and missing, and going crazy. Vincent and says something like "We'd better slow down now," and Jimmy Woods' character takes off on Vincent's character, and Jimmy slapped him. I didn't know he was going to do it, and Vincent didn't know it. Vincent gets so pissed, and you see it in the movie, y'know?

I know that both Lukas's mother and he himself have distanced themselves from the project, or given statements that express some sort of ill will...

Well, you know, the kid's a kid. He wanted to make the film, and there were no surprises. He knew exactly what he had to do, and all those difficult scenes with him were rehearsed. There were no surprises. Well, rehearsing was a problem for him because rehearsing it, actually being there on the day, was a problem. But Lukas did a great, great, great job. He did everything I asked of him, and he's wonderful in the film. He's great. And he fucked up. They all fucked up by thinking they could go on strike in my motherfucking movie? I mean, that's ridiculous. It cost 100,000 euros a day. You can't just stop. So these stupid kids didn't know that. They're just like American kids, kids anywhere, taking drugs fistfuls at a time. He did a great job, though. His mother has quite a story too, but I'm not going to get into her. I'm proud of Lukas, and I'm proud of him in the film. I haven't seen him in a few months—

someone told me that he's looking good. He left Paris for a while and he has a band now. He shaved off all his hair, a real punk. I think he's healthy and kind of okay.

You mentioned that when you first had the idea of doing something about French adolescence, a lot of French producers had discouraged you, said you wouldn't possibly be able to get it, not being a Frenchman yourself. Now that you've made the movie and that people have seen it, what has the response been generally among French people? Has there been any blowback?

The film has been in theaters here in Paris for almost nine weeks. And I think it's still playing in one theater. That's great. A movie being in a theater for two-and-a-half months is fantastic. We had a very good response. People are liking it. Like most of my films, after seeing the film, they don't know what to say for a while. Maybe two weeks later, they can talk about it, or a week later. This happened with quite a few of my films. People see it then, two weeks later, walking down the street, all these different images from the film will hit them, things that happened in the film will hit them.

I don't read reviews anymore, because it doesn't help me at all, doesn't do anything for me. I would read reviews, and critics... They don't talk about the film. They spend the whole fucking article attacking me from the get-go, man. When I made *Bully*, a very well-known reviewer in New York said: "This is the first time that I've wanted a director arrested for making this film." This is a famous critic! Motherfucker wants me arrested! I'm very proud of that. I think that's great. And I know he said the only other time he felt that way was when he saw *Natural Born Killers*. So I'm in pretty good company. What's the critic's name from *The New York Times*?

A.O. Scott?

Tony Scott did a review of *Bully*, and never talks about the fucking movie, just attacks me, attacks me, attacks me. He said pornographers have more integrity than I do. First of all, I have more integrity than almost any motherfucker I know. That's the one thing I do have. I'm very proud of that, that I can make somebody that mad. Here's this sellout fucking critic that gives some of the worst fucking Hollywood movies of all time good reviews, but everybody else doesn't, because it's all politics. Talk about the movie for at least a few sentences in the goddamn review! When the *New York Times* review came out, John Waters sent me a note saying: "That's the best review that you're ever gonna get. It's all good for box office." That's a negative review that makes people have to see the movie.

When *The Smell of Us* came out, it played in Venice first, and we got a review that wasn't so good, and a couple more reviews that weren't so good—and then *Cahiers du Cinéma* gave us 35 pages and the cover. They've never in 50 years put a filmmaker on the cover and given a film 35 pages. It's the most incredible thing you've seen in your life. When it was published, by then reviewers were starting to come around and changing their mind and saying, "Wait a minute, maybe I was a little too negative to this film," and now they're

liking the film. French reaction may've been a little negative. Now they're coming out and we're getting very good press. So I'm told. I'm not reading the good ones or the bad ones, but my producers tell me all the time and people tell me. It's amazingly doing quite well.

Well, you're certainly giving anybody who wants to take the personal-attack route plenty of fuel with this one, being so much in it yourself and being all over it.

Fuck 'em. I do a scene just for them. For the last 50 years, everybody who has criticized me, I do a scene just for them. Just to show them. You'll see.

Can I ask you what's next on the docket?

Last summer, I made *Marfa Girl 2*, a sequel to *Marfa Girl* because in *Marfa Girl* there are so many unanswered questions about the future. The film ends, and all these things have happened, and the film's over, and you don't know how it's going to effect these people in the future, what's going to happen. And I left it that way on purpose, it just happened that way, I was making it up as I went along. So I was gonna to make *Marfa Girl 2*. And so last summer we made it. Mercedes Maxwell and Adam Mediano are 18 now. They had actually just had their 16th birthday when we made the film, and that's why the film is on Adam's 16th birthday. Adam is one day older than Mercedes. The same characters are in the film, and I made it in the summer, and I totally made it up. I had no ideas, no script, no nothing. But I had the money. When the producer said, "I have the money. You want to make the film?" I said, "Yeah." And I was sick. I wasn't in shape. The money was there, so I said: "I might make the movie." And I really actually just made it up day by day by day.

In the first one, the woman with the kid that seduces Adam on his 16th birthday, and he says, "Ah, Miguel is going to kill me." Miguel is the father of her kid, and he's in the penitentiary, and in *Marfa Girl 2*, he's out. He's home. Adam and Mercedes are together and married. All kind of things happen based on the last film. We're editing that now.

And then I'm writing a new film that I'd like to shoot in Paris. I'm writing it here in Paris. I've been writing it for about a week, I just started. It's called *Five Women*. It's about five different women of different ages and how their lives kind of intertwine. So I'm writing that, something totally different. I'm 72, 73. I'm not sure how old I am anymore. I just had a birthday. I'm old. And I've known a lot of women, so it's really interesting for me and a lot of fun to think about all the women I've known, and writing a screenplay because, as we both know, you can take three different people and make one character out of them. It's fun to mix them up and come up with scenes and think back about things that've happened throughout my life. I'm in a very good period because now, I mean, I've lived quite a long time, and had pretty crazy times. It's not so difficult anymore to write. When you're young and you haven't had many experiences, it's different, but once you've experienced as much as I've experienced, and want to write and tell stories, it's really fun. And I'm healthy. I was really sick last year. I had a couple of operations, I thought I was going to die, but

now I'm healed. Took like 14 months for me to get back, but now going to the gym four or five days a week, and I'm back. I'm getting younger every day now instead of older.

Having been around as long as you have, having been documenting youth culture, from the point when you yourself were a kid through the better part of five decades, is there any sort of fundamental difference about the kids that you are working with now that you notice?

There's a continuity. Kids are the same because, no matter how much they know, how much they Google, and how much they see, you have to experience it. They're OK. It's all the same. They're fine. Kids today are fine, it's their world, they're born into it. They don't know any other world.

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