

Acropolis Cinema
presents:



January 15-17, 2020 - 4:00pm & 7:30pm - Lumiere Music
Hall

ABOUT THE FILM

On a weekend day like any other, the simple but lovingly prepared meal a young woman makes for friends takes on unexpected significance. Revelry turns to meditations on mortality, and the tiniest, hard-won gesture of goodness comes from an unexpected party. Night turns to day, and viewers are taken somewhere else entirely—albeit with a lingering dissolve of emotions, ideas, and grace. The first Reverse Shot film production, *Feast of the Epiphany* is both a formally ingenious docu-fictional diptych and an uncommonly sensitive, unified rumination on the ways people form and choose communities, collaborations, and support groups in the face of hardship, labor, and loss.

In person: Michael Koresky, Jeff Reichert, and Farihah Zaman.

Among Friends: A Chat with the Directors of *Feast of the Epiphany* by Andrew Chan

The following interview was originally published by the Criterion Collection, Nov. 29, 2019

Three-person directing teams aren't especially common. So I thought we'd start by talking a bit about what each of you brought to the table on this film.

Farihah: It's difficult to figure out who's responsible for what on this project, barring a few things: Michael wrote the script; Jeff is an amazing director of photography; and I brought a lot in terms of producing early in the process. But that's not what I think about when I remember our collaboration. It all felt so much more fluid than that.

One of the things that was wonderful about making this film is that we all have collaborated in different capacities before. Jeff and I have made documentaries together; Michael and Jeff started Reverse Shot; and Michael has edited my writing there for years. We've also spent a lot of time in each other's company, and the themes you see in the film—grief, food, the importance of gathering—have steeped over time in our conversations. So the movie does encapsulate our shared values.

Jeff: I think of all three of us as people who are restless and are interested in constantly trying things out. Reverse Shot has always been an experiment in film criticism. Michael and I think about the symposiums that we publish there as posing critical challenges to writers and asking them to think about cinema and about their practice in new ways. And now we've made a movie that's half fiction and half documentary, and part of the impetus for doing it was the question: what would happen if we did this? What would it be like?

Michael: We started talking about it around 2011, and my memory is that we were just

walking around the farmer's market saying: wouldn't it be interesting if you had a narrative where there's a dinner and then it cuts off at a certain point and drops you into a documentary about where the food comes from? That being said, we weren't only interested in doing something experimental; we had to have the right reason to do it. And there came a point when we found that this basic framework allowed us to grapple with some very personal things we were experiencing in our lives.

What attracted you to this unusual approach to the hybrid film? In contemporary cinema, the trend has been for movies that mix fiction and documentary to integrate those elements in the same plane of action, but here they are very clearly delineated.

Michael: We wanted people to know what they were watching. Starting out, we weren't inspired by specific films so much as we were working *against* certain trends. One of those trends was what we felt to be the sometimes dispassionate academicism of hybrid films that force audiences to negotiate moment to moment between truth and fiction, which can feel emotionally disengaged. We wanted people to get engaged in the narrative; if you didn't care about the people on-screen before the movie cuts off and drops them, that would have been a failure for us.

Another thing we were working against was this trend in American indie cinema of negativity and nastiness. Usually when you have a movie in which people get together for a dinner, they end up saying horrible things to each other. People think profundity comes out of that. But this movie is about trying as hard as you possibly can to do something nice for someone and failing. To us, that's much more interesting and tragic.

Fariyah: I think what's unique about this movie is that typically, with this kind of hybrid film, you would have narrative as connective tissue. But here we don't give you a narrative handle. We were really asking if it was possible to feel the cohesion of the film on the basis of an emotional rather than a narrative arc.

The performances in the first section are obviously a crucial part of how you shaped that emotional arc. They have a theatrical quality to them, which becomes all the more pronounced when contrasted with the more naturalistic feel of the documentary portion. Since all three of you were new to directing actors, I'm curious how you landed on this stylistic choice.

Michael: From the beginning we were hoping to have a stylized form of acting that didn't get in the way of the emotion, which is hard to do. Shonni Enelow, who was our casting director and dramaturge, helped in the first auditions. She'd give the actors various exercises, telling them to read their lines in different ways: in the style of a Noël Coward drawing-room comedy, for instance, or in the style of Daniel Day-Lewis in *The Age of Innocence*. By the time we cast the actors and got to the first rehearsal, everyone knew that we were doing something a little different. In that way, it was more like experimental theater than we'd originally intended.

Farihah: We talked a lot about how one of the uncanny things about grief is that it touches every part of your life, when you're still in the bell jar, and in complex ways. We didn't give one-to-one instruction; we never said, "Don't forget that this character is sad here, so she'll cut the onions like this." But we did want to capture the fact that when you're grieving, you feel so much in your own world, and when your bubble touches someone else's bubble, it can be unnerving. So we discussed how grief informs your way of moving in the world, and that for some people this happens more acutely than for others.

Farihah and Jeff, was there anything that surprised you about working on your first narrative film?

Farihah: It was fun and off-putting to be thrown into a situation, after having made a few films, where the basics were lost to us. I'd sit down with Ashley [Connor, the cinematographer on the film's first section], and she'd say, "We're shooting twelve pages tomorrow," and I'd say, "Is that bad?" I had no idea. I'd never thought about film and time according to pages before, and you've just blown my mind!

Jeff: There were earlier drafts of this film where after the movie transitions to the farm we started doing the things that would normally happen at the beginning of a documentary: introducing people in a certain way, introducing the space in a certain way. There was something not quite right about that. It wasn't until we screened the film and actually got some feedback that we realized, oh, we're forty-four minutes into a film at this point. We should reject our impulse to start over and give you all the things that you feel at the opening of a movie. Let's just put people into the farm space and see how much we can carry the emotion without introducing you right off the bat.

Farihah mentioned your shared values earlier. I'm wondering how you'd characterize those values, and what you think made this team work. The movie has a palpable sense of having arisen out of friendship.

Jeff: We all have an ethic of "why not just try?" I think in a creative context, people can become defensive and intent on preserving some initial idea they had, whether or not that's borne out in the material they've captured. The cost to try something—whether in a shot or an edit or a line reading—is so small, especially in the way we make films these days. Why not do everything and see which of those things you like best? Often it's the thing you didn't expect that ends up being most exciting, and also most representative of the film.



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