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Kill Your Darlings: A Conversation with Director John Krokidas

Sophia Stein · Thursday, October 17th, 2013

The Beat poets have been the subject of a number of films over the years. *Kill Your Darlings*, written by John Krokidas and Austin Bunn is conceptually one of the most clever and original treatments to date. Told from the point of view of Allen Ginsberg (played by Daniel Radcliffe), who is just beginning his studies at Columbia University, *Kill Your Darlings* offers a glimpse at the budding friendships between himself, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs, with Lucien Carr as a catalyst, muse, and maestro of the rebellious band.

“Capturing that spirit of being nineteen and wanting to say something authentic — something that was different from what your parents taught you, different from what you were learning in books — was one of the reasons that I made this film,” Krokidas, who also directed the picture, explains. A labor of love, *Kill Your Darlings* was ten years in the making. During that time Krokidas was able to assemble a first-class acting ensemble. Daniel Radcliffe cleanly transitions out from under the innocent thumb of Harry Potter to metamorphose into a commanding lead of adult material. Dane DeHaan (*Chronicle*) is riveting as the charismatic and conflicted Lucien Carr; the heat between him and Radcliffe is palpable. Ben Foster as William Burroughs intrigues, Jack Huston and Elizabeth Olsen serve up a spicy duo as Jack Kerouac and Edie Parker, and Michael C. Hall, as Lucien’s stalker friend, David Kammerer, is creepy to a T.

Krokidas earned his BA in Theatre and American Studies from Yale University, and he did graduate work in the Film Program at NYU. A majority of the members of his production team were friends that he made along the way. In addition to the screenwriting talent of co-writer Austin Bunn, some artful editing by Brian Kates infuses acts of creation and drug-induced insanity with a jazzy syncopation throughout.

Krokidas grew up in New Haven, Connecticut, and he carries a torch of New Haven pride along with a hankering for Pepe’s white clam pizza. “You know, New Haven has got more arts per capita than most cities in America. It’s a very tolerant and educated small city,” he defends. “I still like going back home.” When I ask him where he is based today, “Everywhere!” he retorts with infectious cackle. “I am living the bicoastal dream on an independent film budget at the moment.”

I had the pleasure of talking with John Krokidas at The Fairmont Hotel about his film, *Kill Your Darlings*, about “honor killings,” and how Allen Ginsberg inspired his own sense of artistic intrepidity.



Left to right: Dane DeHaan as Lucien Carr and Daniel Radcliffe as Allen Ginsberg

Photo by Clay Enos, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

Sophia Stein: What was your first exposure to the writings of Allen Ginsberg? Do you remember?

John Krokidas: I was a closeted teenager in suburban Connecticut. Which is hardly the most conservative place in the United States, yet in my first week of high school, somebody came out anonymously to the school paper, and the reaction was pretty violent. I thought to myself, Okay, I guess I have to put my own self-discovery on pause, until I can get out of town, and hopefully go to college. Then, somebody mentioned Allen Ginsberg in a derogatory way, “Ginsberg, you mean that gay writer?!” and it was as if an alarm went off in my head. Ding-ding-ding, who is this Allen Ginsberg, and how do I find him? I went to Waldenbooks and found a collection of his poetry. I remember feeling like I was reading a dirty book, that my parents’ friends might catch me, and it was somehow dangerous and exciting. Most importantly, reading how brave Ginsberg was, how open he was about his sexuality, his passion, his politics, about who he was. I remember wishing and hoping that I could be that brave myself one day. Once you start reading one Beat’s work, you start reading the rest. I have always admired Kerouac for his search for authenticity and real human experience. I loved Burroughs just for being the rebel that he was; Burroughs lived his punk-rock ethos all the way to the very end. But the most poignant thing that I discovered about the Beats — not only did they start this counter-culture revolution which persists — they remained friends, collaborators, each other’s critics and supporters throughout their entire lives. That’s always been my dream. My first week of film school — don’t laugh, but I was determined to create a film movement. I called it *The Nouvelle Vague* [pronounced “vay-g,” i.e. uncertain]. “Vague” would allow me to figure out the rules later. The cool thing about this movie is that it was a family and friends effort in so many ways: I wrote it with my roommate from college, Austin Bunn; the editor, Brian Kates is a friend from film school; my writing group (all of my friends from university and film school), helped me to develop the screenplay. To get the chance to finally bring my first film to life with all these people that I care about, is an incredibly poignant experience.

S2: How did you learn about this particular incident with Lucien Carr and David Kammerer?

JK: I didn’t know about it until Austin told me about ten years ago. Austin wanted to write it as a play, but I had just finished film school, and I started seeing the images in the movie version come to life in my head. So I manipulated him and convinced him that we had to write this together as a screenplay. But Austin knows me well-enough to know when I’m pulling my Jedi mind-trick, and when I’m not. And he did want to be a screenwriter. During our sophomore year, he shared his first screenplay with me. So actually I was making one of his dreams come true.

S2: What was your process as writing partners?

JK: I’m much more the structuralist. Coming from playwriting, Austin’s innate strength is character and dialogue. So we complement each other. Also, Austin has experience as a journalist, and I am terrified of the empty page — but he’s not, because he’s so used to writing on deadline. So Austin is great at pumping out the first draft, and I love nothing more than reworking and perfecting. It was our passion project, something that we did on the side, while we worked to pay the rent. Then about four years in, we finally got the confidence to show it to someone. Austin was co-writer on Christine Vachon’s second book, and we sent it to her, not knowing if she would ever actually read it; but then she did! The first great moment of my professional life, Christine Vachon flew out to meet with me, to convince me that she should produce this movie. *Kids, Happiness, Boys Don’t Cry, I Shot Andy Warhol, Hedwig and the Angry Inch, Mildred Pierce, I’m Not There* — I grew up so inspired by so many films that Christine Vachon had produced.

S2: What kind of research did you do to pen the screenplay?

JK: We started with the biographies. Then there is so much oral history that people have collected on the web. I visited the Ginsberg archives at Stanford University that includes letters between

these guys and Allen and his father. Physical scouting included breaking into Jack Kerouac's college apartment by pressing all the buzzers on the building until somebody let us in. The Columbia students who were living there had no idea that they were living in Jack Kerouac's [former] apartment! Ultimately, we were able to shoot in so many of the locations in which the events actually took place: the Union Theological Seminary where Allen and Lucien lived down the hall from one other in dorm rooms; the park by the river where the murder took place; classrooms at Columbia University where they had actually attended classes.



Left to right: Ben Foster as William Burroughs, Daniel Radcliffe as Allen Ginsberg and Dane DeHaan as Lucien Carr

Photo by Clay Enos, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

S2: Some of the incidents in the screenplay are based on the historical record, but some are based on your personal college experiences –

JK: Just one. Allen documented a lot of his conversations with Lucien in his journals – conversations about wanting to tear up the literary canon and shake-up the over-protective powers at Columbia. You know, those conversations that we all had until three in the morning when we were nineteen years old. But putting them in a movie, is the most un-cinematic – and let's face it – pretentious thing. So, in order to actualize these kind of conversations, we came up with the library heist sequence — which may or may not have been inspired by actual events in the writers' lives. [Enormous laugh.] I'm not allowed to provide details, but I was a member of *The Pundits*, which is a secret society at Yale made up of practical jokers.

S2: The scene where Ginsberg's mother tells him that his dad was right to leave her and she advises him to protect his own interests –

JK: That advice is the heart of the movie. *Kill Your Darlings* is about “the emotional violence that comes with the birth of the self,” Austin says. When you're eighteen or nineteen, you meet somebody more worldly and confident, perhaps more popular and attractive than you, who takes you under their wing, and shows you that you have more possibilities than you ever imagined! Often you fall in love with this person, and they encourage you to grow — but only so high, and never as high as themselves. I remember a relationship that I had with someone similar to Lucien. I think that is universal. I was taught in writing class that you need to metaphorically kill your parents, in order to truly find your own voice. “Kill the King” is a very common theme in Western literature.

S2: What do you believe is the filmmaker's responsibility, if any, to the historical record?

JK: Most important to us was being honest to who these characters were at the ages that they are portrayed in the movie. The danger with research, because there is so much material, we started to feel insecure that the characters would have to live up to who they later become. It was only when I put a moratorium on research after 1945, that we felt our depictions were more honest.

S2: I had never heard about this concept of an “honor slaying” before — the idea that committing a murder to stave off a homosexual assault was a viable legal defense.

JK: That pissed me off so much. It is the reason why I kept fighting to get this movie made for ten years. The fact that in 1944, you could literally get away with murder by portraying your victim as a homosexual. And that it was called an honor slaying!?! It still enrages me, just even saying it out loud, right now. For a movement that was so embracing of all different kinds of sexuality, to have been born through this incredibly violent act?! Ultimately, their muse Lucien Carr got off, using (basically) a gay panic defense.

S2: Lucien requested that Allen write his defense. Did you have access to that primary document?

JK: Lucien Carr managed to keep all this stuff under wraps while he was still alive. Allen

Ginsberg's account, *Blood Song* was eventually published in *The Book of Martyrdom and Artifice. The Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks*, the account penned by Jack and Bill, wasn't published until 2008. We tried unsuccessfully to get permission to access it at Columbia University at the time that we wrote the screenplay (2005). What is so profound about the whole thing, was that particular event was the thing that caused Allen Ginsberg to write his first piece of fiction.

S2: Is "honor slaying" still a legal concept in practice in any states across the United States today?

JK: In the United States, I don't believe so. But I have been told that it exists in a couple of African countries. In Yemen, members of Al Qaeda are taking out their aggression, picking off homosexuals with guns, and the government either closes their eyes or condones such killings. Look at the violence in the streets of the Russia, where neo-Nazi gangs are beating up people whom they perceive to be homosexual.



*Left to right: Daniel Radcliffe as Allen Ginsberg and Dane DeHaan as Lucien Carr
Photo by Jessica Miglio, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics*

S2: You have been working over a number of years as a screenwriter. How is it to work on material that you generate yourself versus material that is suggested to you, as a work for hire?

JK: When you are self-generating material, the only people who you need to collaborate with are your co-writer, or your director (if you're working with a director), or simply yourself. When you are doing work for hire, obviously the people who bring the project to you, want to make it for a certain reason. It is important that you take their creative needs into consideration, as well as your own. However, what I have learned is, you can only write what you know. You cannot write just to honor somebody else's personal connections. So, really, it is about finding your own connection to the material, and pitching that when you're up for a job.



*Left to right: Dane DeHaan as Lucien Carr and Daniel Radcliffe as Allen Ginsberg
Photo by Clay Enos, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics*

S2: The performance by Dane DeHaan as Lucien is riveting. How did you come to cast DeHaan?

JK: My boyfriend of ten years, who is a fan of *In Treatment* on H.B.O., actually suggested Dane DeHaan from the beginning. (But we often don't follow the advice of the ones we love most, and we have to go on our own personal journey to find the truth.) So I ended up doing a bunch of old-fashioned chemistry reads, Daniel Radcliffe with actors that I had short-listed for the role of Lucien. Dane came in first and completely blew it out of the water. I felt horrible for everyone who came after Dane, because Daniel and I knew, in that moment. We felt it; the chemistry was so palpable between the two of them. Now they are practically best friends. Dane moved in with Daniel for a stay-cation for a month in New York.

S2: What was your process in directing the actors?

JK: My process in directing the actors was fighting really hard for the actors I believed in, taking as much time as I could to get to know them as people, and to show them who I was. Then I fought for a rehearsal process. I borrowed a method from Francis Ford Coppola, where you improv scenes that aren't in the script. That way, you don't get worried that you are tying-down certain line-readings or playing a scene where you will never be able to recreate the magic again. Some of those improvs were so good that we ended up shooting them for the movie. For example, when Allen and Lucien are walking around, "The new vision declares, no proclaims, proclaims is better..." That whole kind of marching around in a circle and William Burroughs psychoanalyzing them, that was born from an improv.

S2: This is your directorial feature debut. How was it to transition from screenwriting?

JK: I hadn't been on the treadmill for ten years, but as soon as I got back on it, it felt pretty organic. To be honest, it was so hard getting this movie made. It fell apart a few times. I have had my dreams dashed on this one, over and over and over again. The hardest part for me was the month before we went into production, where the financing was still coming together, and there was a chance that it would fall apart — after I had assembled this great cast, after we picked out the locations. So that first day, when there was a camera there, and there were actors there, and costumes, that was the most joyful day of my life – because it meant that this was finally happening after all this time.

Kill Your Darlings is currently playing in selected theatres. Details [here](#) and [here](#).

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