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“RICH HILL” – The State of the Nation in Rich Hill, MO

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, February 12th, 2014

Is “hope” all that remains of the emblematic American dream? In the aftermath of our nation’s financial collapse and the technological and global upheaval of recent decades, one is prompted to ponder this question in watching “RICH HILL.” The documentary portrait of three youths and their families struggling to survive in the mined-out Midwestern town of Rich Hill, Missouri, provides a stark contrast to those idyllic Norman Rockwellian images of small-town, rural America. “RICH HILL” walked away with the Grand Jury Prize in the US Documentary Competition at Sundance 2014. The film takes us inside the homes of Andrew, Harley, and Appachey, to paint a heart-breaking and indelible portrait of isolated kids and marginalized parents.

Emmy-award winning director Tracy Droz Tragos teamed up with her cousin Andrew Droz Palermo to produce and direct the documentary about the town where the two had spent many a summer and winter vacation visiting their grandparents as children. Their grandparents were pillars of the community; granddad was a town grocer and mail carrier, and their grandmother was a grade school teacher, which offered them intimate community access and support in making the film. “Where youth in an urban setting might have access to sources of help and hope, kids in rural areas often are stranded and their acute need goes unseen and unrecorded ... We hope that by bearing witness to their struggle, audiences will see low-income rural families with new eyes and will respond to their condition with a greater understanding and a greater sense of urgency,” the filmmakers explain.

I had an opportunity to speak with editor Jim Hession about his contribution to the project. Hession just received an Emmy Award-nomination for co-editing “MARINA ABRAMOVI?: THE ARTIST IS PRESENT,” which John Waters included on his list of the Ten Best Movies of 2012. In 2013, Hession was the recipient of the prestigious 3rd Annual Karen Schmeer Film Editing Fellowship Award at the SXSW Film Festival.

I met up with Hession following the screening of “RICH HILL” that took place at Sundance Resort during the 2014 Sundance Film Festival, and we sat down at the Yarrow Hotel and Conference Center to discuss “RICH HILL,” the art of editing, and the state of the American dream.



“RICH HILL” receives the 2014 Sundance Grand Jury Prize in the US Documentary Competition. Producers & Directors Tracy Droz Tragos and Andrew Droz, Editor Jim Hession, and Composer Nathan Halpern. Photo courtesy of Sundance Film Festival.

Sophia Stein: How were you introduced to directors Tracy Droz Tragos and Andrew Droz Palermo for the first time and invited to collaborate on “RICH HILL”?

Jim Hession: I received the Karen Schmeer Film Editing Fellowship Award at the beginning of 2012, which generated some nice press. I believe that’s how Tracy and Andrew heard my name.

Before we spoke, Tracy and Andrew shared with me a fifteen minute cut of footage they had already shot for “RICH HILL.” There were three characters, and they had done a five minute summary of each character. From watching the piece, it was obvious that they really cared about their subjects, and their subjects cared about them. They had this unique relationship with the town. It seemed to me that their footage was going to be very intimate and original, and I was taken by Andrew’s beautiful shooting style.

My understanding is that they had something very specific in mind with “RICH HILL” — a documentary that was not necessarily traditional. It was important for them that the movie took on some sort of cinematic aesthetic. They talked about their hopes and dreams for the film and how we might strike the right balance and tone. They had interviewed twenty-five editors before speaking with me. That first time that we spoke over the phone, the three of us ended up speaking for two and a half hours.



Rich Hill, Missouri, 70 miles south of Kansas City, 15 miles east of the Kansas border. Photo courtesy of “RICH HILL.”

S²: So you worked with Tracy and Andrew for a while before you met them?

JH: “RICH HILL” was part of the edit and story lab at Sundance Institute in June, 2013. We had been working together for about a month and a half prior to that first meeting.

My wife and I had moved into a new apartment in New York City with our six month old daughter, and one of the big selling points about this new apartment was that it had a walk-in closet. (A walk-in closet in Manhattan is unheard of! The price was right, and that’s why we moved in there.)

About three weeks later, I talked to Tracy and Andrew who were going to be working in LA. I was going to be working in New York, and we didn’t have a budget for renting office space. I loved the project, I loved them, and I really wanted to work on it. So I went to my wife and said, “Look, I think this walk-in closet is going to have to double as my office/editing studio ...” Mariela, my wife, really deserves an executive producer credit on “RICH HILL” for donating our one closet to the production! So I cut the whole film five feet from my bed. Right above my monitors were all my daughter’s dresses, and behind me was my wife’s shoe rack – which was kind of fitting for this movie which is such a personal film. I was working in the closet for about a month and a half. [Big laugh.] And then I finally came out of the closet, and we all went to Sundance, where we met face to face for the first time.

One of the great things about working as an editor is that you bounce off of other people’s passions. In watching Tracy and Andrew’s footage, hearing them talk with their characters, and seeing what Andrew was moved to shoot at any given time, I felt like I knew them before I actually met them. We talked, skyped, and emailed every day. By the time I met them face-to-face, I felt like I was meeting old friends.

S²: Can you describe the work process at Sundance Institute edit lab?

JH: We had six great advisors. There were three other films, with all the directors and editors participating. During the first two days, everyone watched each others' films (in the various states that they were in), and then we would all sit around and talk about them. They limited us to screening a 90 minute cut. (We had a lot more material.) One of the great things about the lab, was that it forced us to make some choices early on. We really wanted to maximize the experience, so in the run-up to the labs, I was working twelve hour days, trying to quickly push the project forward.

S²: Is that 90-minute cut very similar to what we saw in the theatre?

JH: At that point, it was rough, but it was all there.

Tracy and Andrew had been shooting for a year and a half before I started working with them. They did these trips to Rich Hill for a couple of weeks at a time. Then they would come home, watch the footage, and rough stuff out. Both of them are capable editors in their own right. By the time I came on to the project, they had about 4-hours worth of material — some scenes that were well-worked, and some stuff that was just kind-of ideas.

The trick for us was to set up each character, their families, and the dynamics in the first act. Then, at the end, we started thinking about how we might blend these characters. We wanted to get to a point where all the characters were almost speaking for each other, interweave them where they might become like one person. For example, where Appachey says something, but he could actually be speaking for Harley, or vice-versa. That was what we were striving for. So in the labs, we spent a lot of time trying to figure out how that might work.

S²: What were some additional editing challenges unique to “RICH HILL”?

JH: The thing about “RICH HILL” — we had three characters who were not all on the same basketball team or chess team. It's not a traditional doc, in the sense that we didn't have a fixed narrative. There was no pre-determined beginning, middle, or end.

Typically, there is a very standard interviewing technique in docs where the director will ask their subject, “Please repeat my question in your answer.” For example, If I ask you, “What's your name?” — you can't just say, “Harley.” You have to say, “My name is Harley.” Tracy and Andrew by choice never did that, because they weren't directing professionals. They were working with kids and real people and wanted to get a real response. If they had started coaching people in that way, it might have come across as false. I really appreciated that. And it made for some difficult editing.



Harley (15) with his grandmother, Rich Hill, Missouri. Photo courtesy of “RICH HILL.”

S²: The editing was a phenomenal feat. Harley’s story comes to mind – the trick or treating scene where he says, “I am against rape.” — but there is a foreboding of the revelations to come. It is such a gentle way to introduce his story.

JH: Tracy and Andrew always asked each of the kids in the beginning, “Why do you think we are following you?” And each of them, in their own way basically said, “People like us don’t get our stories told that much, and I think people will be interested.” That was the essence. And they are totally right.

In the beginning, we set Harley up as the goof-ball, the joker. So that by the time you get to Halloween, you think he is just riffing. Then, all of a sudden, the other side of Haley comes out. When he reveals what happened to him as a kid, in his own way. He knew what he was doing. He was being incredibly generous to us and the audience. It was really important to reveal his story in the most respectful way possible.

As an editor, those are the sort of moments where you just don’t cut. Everyone thinks an editor is someone who cuts the shots and puts them together, but when you find those moments, you just let it play. I can’t remember how long that Halloween scene is, but I think that it is probably two and a half minutes without a cut. It’s probably my favorite scene in the film.

S²: The one kid, Andrew, who is the most disciplined and optimistic of the bunch. He is so compassionate for the struggles of his parents. Wow, you walk away just loving that kid.

JH: He’s a resilient guy. They are all resilient in their own ways.

S²: How would you describe the essence of this story, in your personalization of it?

JH: Maybe that resilience of youth itself, is what drew me to this project. This is kind-of a coming-of-age story. These were adolescent boys on the verge of becoming adults. Andrew starts off very idealistic. He has all this love and faith in his parents and the future. Towards the end,

that gets a little cracked. But he still believes ... he still believes in his father. At the very end, he says, "I think we are going to find a place." It is the starting point of him seeing the world a little differently, after everything that he has gone through.

S²: But he also says, "I have no say in what happens. I am just a kid." What is society's responsibility to those kids?

JH: I know. It's a tricky film. There is a lot.



Andrew (14) with his younger siblings, Rich Hill, Missouri. Photo courtesy of "RICH HILL."

S²: I had a very visceral and specific reaction to the film. For me, "RICH HILL" was a film about boys who were the victims of mentally ill, failing and flailing parents. I felt like, no matter where you have grown up in America, there are always kids you meet who are suffering because of the brokenness, toxicity, narcissism, or the poor choices of the parents and the home they are creating. For me, it is a story that cuts across economic and social divides – both the very rich and the very poor, may be similarly afflicted. So, as an audience member, I was livid about the abusive parents. But I know that Tracy and Andrew, this was primarily a story about resources. It was much more of a class story.

JH: I think that there is a lot of pressure for docs to speak to a social issue. That's what the funders and buyers want to hear. A lot of times, in talking about our work, we have to attach it to a social issue. In this case, "poverty." The movie is, in my mind, about a lot more than just that. I would like to think that it is about being a human being, about family, and that it is about the resilience of the human spirit.

Our characters were up against a lot. We all are. This sort of behavior does happen across class boundaries. It is the sort of thing that people keep away from public view. It is the stuff that happens behind closed doors. Our subjects, to their credit (and to Tracy and Andrew's credit), were generous to share some really difficult things in their lives. For all the "fucked-up-ness" that goes on in all of our lives, that is just part of being a human being — there is some beauty in that ... and love. And there is still hope.

S²: Was anyone in particular influential as a mentor on this project?

JH: Jean Tsien, A.C.E., was a huge fan of the movie from the get-go. She gave feedback on cuts all along the way. Tracy and Andrew did a lab with IFP in LA with Douglas Blush, who cut “20 Feet from Stardom.” He was another editor who was really helpful in process.

S²: Who are your personal mentors? Editors whose work inspires and moves you?

JH: Right out of college, I was lucky enough to get in on staff at HBO Documentary. I assisted two really great editors: Juliet Weber and Geof Bartz, A.C.E. I stayed with the two of them for about four years as an assistant. After that, I continued assisting for a lot of great editors. I probably assisted for longer than most — at this point in time. Twenty years ago, especially when people were cutting on film, people assisted for a long time. They worked in a room beside the editors and learned from them. There was a mentorship of assistants that is a little bit lost these days. Now that editing is done on computers, usually the assistants come in at night when the editor leaves. There is no longer a real mentor-mentee relationships. A lot of my fellow assistants at the time started taking jobs in reality television. That was never what I wanted to edit anyway, so I wasn’t in a rush to leave. So I just kept assisting. By the time that the Marina Abramovi? documentary came along, I was ready. I was a first time editor, but I felt like I had failed, succeeded, and been taught along the way.

S²: John Waters says that Marina Abramovi? is the best documentary ever made about an artist?

JH: That blew my mind. The response – you never know when you put this stuff out in the world.

S²: Whose work in film is inspiring to you from the point of view of the editing?

JH: I went to Tufts University in Boston, and first became interested in documentary film when I was in College. I was a history major, but I took some film classes. The first documentaries that really moved me were by Frederick Wiseman, another Boston guy. Now we consider his films, classical vérité. At the time he was making them, his work was pretty revolutionary.

Errol Morris was working in Boston when I was in college. He’s still there. Films like “Mr. Death,” “The Fog of War,” and “Fast, Cheap, & Out of Control” – what drew me to those films was the cinematic quality that he was incorporating into traditional documentaries.

People have called “RICH HILL,” a cinema vérité film, but it is infused with a cinematic flair that I credit to Errol Morris.

S²: You are the recipient of the 2013 Karen Schmeer Film Editing Fellowship Award. In what ways have you profited as the beneficiary of this honor?

JH: First of all, Errol Morris’ editor was Karen Schmeer. She edited “Fast, Cheap, & Out of Control,” “Mr. Death,” and “The Fog of War” — three films that, quite honestly, are largely the reasons why I am a documentary editor today! She was a great editor. So to get the award in her name, was incredibly humbling, in all honesty. This idea that someone whose work had meant so much to me, that now, I could play a small role in keeping her memory alive, is amazing.

The award has brought some public recognition to my efforts as a documentary editor. Christopher Tellefsen, who was the editor of such great films as “Moneyball,” “Capote,” and “Metropolitan,” is my A.C.E. editing mentor; I wouldn’t have met him without the Karen Schmeer Fellowship. He came to the Sundance screening of “RICH HILL” the other day.

When I return to New York, I am planning to take a Pro Tools class at Manhattan Editors Workshop that the fellowship will fund. People may not typically think of sound as the picture editor’s job, but you know, half of a movie is sound, right? I would like to be able to experiment a little bit with the use of sound. This goes back to the idea of the trying to make documentaries a little more cinematic. I want to take the Pro Tools class so that I can implement some of the ideas that I have in my head a little bit better.

S²: As part of the fellowship, they ask you to write a blog. Is this something you enjoy and will continue, or is this a burden that detracts from your main focus as an editor?

JH: I love writing the blog, and I wish I had more time to write more entries. Writing was actually my first love. In college, I was a history major. There was a period where I thought that I might want to be a historian and write history books. The physical act of editing is extremely similar to the physical act of writing. You sit down for hours at a time, and you keep working it and working it, until you get it to where you want it to be. It’s a lot of trial and error — a lot of failure and a lot of success, hopefully. In college, I sought out classes where I didn’t have in-class tests, where I could write a paper instead. Whenever I sat down to write an essay on an exam in an hour, I couldn’t get everything that I wanted to say down in the right way in the allotted time. But if I could go back to my dorm room and sit there with a cup of coffee and relax and work out my thoughts on paper over a long period of time, I would love that process. Editing is exactly the same thing.

S²: As an editor, how do you find projects?

JH: That’s a good question. You come to places like Sundance, and you just start talking to people. I always want to take on a project that best suits my strengths because I owe that to the director, and I owe it to myself. There are a lot of great documentaries out there that I probably wouldn’t be a great fit for. As a viewer, I could enjoy them, but that doesn’t mean that I would be the best editor. So you have got to find the right relationship. That is something that I take seriously. I do not currently have agency representation, but I would be open to it.



Boarded up home, Rich Hill, Missouri. Photo courtesy of "RICH HILL."

S²: “If you want to change your life, you just need to work hard to make better choices.” Director Andrew has commented that he rejects that popular notion. “No one can do it on their own. We all need help,” he claims. In light of his perspective, what is “RICH HILL” trying to say about the state of the American dream today?

JH: There is this crazy statistic floating around that four hundred people possess half the wealth in this country. I’m a filmmaker, I’m not an economist, but as a human being, I think that statistic has stood out for me throughout this whole process of editing. That is not right! There is something out of whack there. Common sense tells you that. “RICH HILL” demonstrates what happens to our kids when we live in a society where the distribution of wealth is so out of whack and getting worse every day. You can say what you want about our kids’ parents, but they were raised under similar circumstances. So if you watch this film and have all this sympathy for our kids, they are going to be parents, ten years from now.

S²: It’s why I wanted to see the film ... because I am so worried about the growing economic disparity. Because my friends, who are from privileged backgrounds and so many people I know are struggling. Were these kids or were these families paid for their participation in the documentary?

JH: They were not. We hope that some economic benefits will come to them. There has been some talk about when the film sells, sharing some of the resources with them.

S²: I would hope that the film might inspire some benefactors to step up.

JH: Benefactors might be able to help out more than we could. Andrew’s mother passed away a week before Sundance. So the film set up a Go Fund Me campaign to cover the funeral costs.

[In partnership with non-profit organizations, experts, and leaders around the country, the filmmakers are developing an impact and engagement campaign for “RICH HILL” that will give audiences meaningful ways to support vulnerable kids and their families living in low-income

households in rural America.]

S²: We live in a culture and times where transparency is encouraged – on Facebook, on Reality TV – yet, that kind of transparency is not always rewarded. These are children. Do you think their participation in a documentary like this might have adverse consequences in the future for these kids?

JH: It's a fair question. I don't know. What I hope that comes out of it for them, is that there is some reassurance that their voice is important. Because a lot of times, kids like them don't understand that people are even interested in listening to them. They had a chance to come to Sundance and sit in an audience of people listening to them, and caring about them, and I do hope that they walk away with some sort of validation.

S²: It is quite possibly the most therapeutic experience that they have ever had.

JH: I hope so. I was sitting behind Appachey during the first screening, and he got really choked up watching the film. Talking to him afterwards, it turned out that his emotional response was to Harley's story. So all three of these kids have a bond now. I hope that they stay in touch and help each other out in the future. I hadn't met any of our characters before Sundance. They are all great kids. Before they left, I got all their contact information, and I intend to stay in touch with all of them, and to be there for them if they want to talk.



Appachey (13), Rich Hill, Missouri. Photo courtesy of "RICH HILL."

S²: Will you partner with Tracy and Andrew in the future?

JH: I would love to. I felt like I went to war with them a little bit. I have only known Tracy and Andrew for about six or seven months, but I feel like I have known them for a lifetime.

Top Image: Andrew (14). Photo courtesy of "RICH HILL."

For additional information, visit the "RICH HILL" film website.



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