

Mongrel Media

Presents

INTO THE ABYSS



A Werner Herzog Film
106 min. USA, 2011
Languages: English

FESTIVALS:
2011 TELLURIDE FILM FESTIVAL
2011 TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Distribution



1028 Queen Street West
Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M6J 1H6
Tel: 416-516-9775 Fax: 416-516-0651
E-mail: info@mongrelmedia.com
www.mongrelmedia.com

Publicity

Bonne Smith
Star PR
Tel: 416-488-4436
Fax: 416-488-8438
E-mail: starpr@sympatico.ca

High res stills may be downloaded from <http://www.mongrelmedia.com/press.html>

SYNOPSIS

In his fascinating examination of a triple homicide case in Conroe, Texas, Werner Herzog probes the human psyche to explore why people kill—and why a state kills. In intimate conversations with those involved, including 28-year-old death row inmate Michael Perry (who was scheduled to die eight days after his interview with Herzog), the filmmaker achieves what he describes as “a gaze into the abyss of the human soul.” Herzog’s inquiries also extend to the other convicted killer, Jason Burkett; his father, also incarcerated; a woman who lost both her mother and brother in the crime; as well as a chaplain and former executioner who’ve been with death row prisoners as they’ve taken their final breaths. As he’s so often done before, Herzog’s investigation unveils layers of humanity, making an enlightening trip out of ominous territory.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I am not an advocate of the death penalty. I do not even have an argument; I only have a story, the history of the barbarism of Nazi Germany.

There were thousands and thousands of cases of capital punishment; there was a systematic program of euthanasia, and on top of it the industrialized extermination of six million Jews in a genocide that has no precedence in human history.

The argument that innocent men and women have been executed is, in my opinion, only a secondary one. A State should not be allowed - under any circumstance - to execute anyone for any reason. End of story.

- Werner Herzog

AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIK NELSON, PRODUCER

In terms of working with Werner Herzog, as you have before on several films, how was INTO THE ABYSS different from other Herzog films — and how was it the same?

In the last year alone, Werner and I have done two films together, one a descent into inaccessible depths in order to discover what it means to be human — and the other a film about caves! The other films I worked on with Werner were far more exotic experiences — GRIZZLY MAN, set in the forests of Alaska, ENCOUNTERS AT THE END OF THE WORLD in Antarctica, and of course, CAVE OF FORGOTTEN DREAMS in the Chauvet Cave in Southern France. INTO THE ABYSS was an adventure of an entirely different sort, more about the bizarre landscapes of the human soul than those of geography.

In terms of what sets it apart from other Herzog films I've been involved with, INTO THE ABYSS is deliberately spare in its scoring, in its cutting, and most importantly in its lack of narration by Herzog. Werner has become a justifiable legend for the richness of his narration — and the flights of narrative fancy that drive that narration. On this film Werner says nothing, and lets the story speak for itself. That is a testament to the power of INTO THE ABYSS.

Capturing “ecstatic truth” on film is Herzog’s recurring goal as a filmmaker. How in your opinion does he capture it here?

“Ecstatic truth” in Werner’s mind always co-exists with the “accountant’s truth” — things as they are without any interpretation. What’s fascinating about INTO THE ABYSS is that the film is on one level completely the accountant’s truth; everything you see is what happened in front of Werner’s camera. His process is laid bare. But the way he shaped the final product, and where the audience finds itself after they’ve viewed the film, defines the ecstatic truth — where structure of the ecstatic whole transcends its building blocks.

Why Conroe, Texas? Besides the obvious Rick Perry overlap. Was there something specific about Montgomery County that drew Herzog to this project? Or was it more a question of timing?

It took six months of pre-production going through the various cases on Death Row in order to find cases worthy of Werner’s attention, and subjects willing to appear in front of his cameras. The unique thing about the Michael Perry case was that Michael was executed just eight days after Werner spoke with him for the one and only time.

I think this film is absolutely necessary at this particular moment of American history. There seems to be a wedge issue in politics surrounding the death penalty in much the same way that gay marriage and Iraq war were cynically used as wedge issues in the recent past. Werner feels that this film will contribute to a necessary national dialogue on the subject. Whether you support the death penalty, or oppose it as Werner does, you won't think about it in the same way after viewing this film.

Werner and my friend and colleague, writer Harlan Ellison has said, "You are not entitled to your opinion, you are entitled to your *informed* opinion." I think INTO THE ABYSS is all about that informing process.

Can you discuss how quickly the film took shape after the particular case was chosen as a point of focus, and Herzog had secured and filmed all the interviews?

Werner has a very fast improvisational and instinctive approach to post-production and the film took the shape that it needed to take, which is to say organically. He and his editor, Joe Bini, were pretty much swept away by the inevitability of the structure that the film inherently possessed.

The interesting thing about INTO THE ABYSS, and the most striking thing about Werner's talents as a filmmaker, is that he wasn't allowed, due to prison restrictions, much time with the people he interviewed. The prison sets the agenda and timetable here, Werner doesn't.

But he was able to extract these incredible insights from people he met and spoke with from behind glass — subjects with whom he had only a half an hour to connect. If there's anything that this process demonstrates, it's Werner's genius and gift for conducting interviews. He's one of the best reporters in the business, though I am sure he'd hate to be referred to as one!

Werner is also incredibly methodical and disciplined — he never wastes a shot, a production dollar, or leaves a creative insight on the table. He's the opposite of undisciplined, and has a grossly undeserved reputation for being a madman. And as his producer I can assure you that his method comes way before any madness — and any madness never comes at all.

The Troy Davis story is obviously fresh in a lot of people's minds — did Werner want to start a conversation about the death penalty with this film because of these stories?

There's a dimension to the death penalty that transcends issues of guilt or innocence, as in the case of Troy Davis. The issue that Werner is focused not on guilt or innocence, but rather, right or wrong. INTO THE ABYSS documents the collateral damage that the implementation of the death penalty holds, in terms of those involved with carrying out the actual execution, those charged with the witnessing of the execution, and of course, those who are about to be executed.

All of Herzog's films, to a degree, offer a gaze into the abyss of the human soul. How does this film stand apart in this regard?

What I think is interesting about this film is that it's a uniquely American subject. The death penalty as it is carried out in this country is something unique to the United States, and there's an aspect to this film that makes it a true American Gothic portrait — which is where the comparisons to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* seem to come in. That is to say, a brilliant intellectual tries to come to grips with a life in an "ordinary" United States — which of course turns out to be more extraordinary than anything the observer has previously imagined.

CHARACTER LIST IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

1. Reverend Richard Lopez
2. Michael Perry
3. Lt. Damon Hall
4. Lisa Stotler-Balloun
5. Charles Richardson
6. Jason Burkett
7. Jared Talbert
8. Amanda West
9. Delbert Burkett
10. Melyssa Thompson-Burkett
11. Fred Allen

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

Werner Herzog – Director

Werner Herzog (real name Werner H. Stipetic) was born in Munich and grew up removed from technology in a remote Bavarian village. He worked as a welder to fund production of his first film at age nineteen and has since directed more than fifty features. He has also published more than a dozen books or prose and directed as many operas. His films have won numerous awards, including the special grand jury prize at the Cannes Film Festival for THE ENIGMA OF KASPAR HAUSER (74) and best director at the Cannes Film Festival for FITZCARRALDO (82). His other films include: AGUIRRE, THE WRATH OF GOD (72), NOSFERATU (78), LITTLE DIETER NEEDS TO FLY (97), GRIZZLY MAN (05), RESCUE DAWN (06), BAD LIEUTENANT: PORT OF CALL NEW ORLEANS (09) and CAVE OF FORGOTTEN DREAMS (10).

Erik Nelson – Producer

Erik Nelson is the president of Creative Differences, a production company with offices in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C. and Vancouver. Recent projects produced and directed by Nelson include the Discovery Channel's animated mini-series DINOSAUR REVOLUTION, 9-11: SCIENCE AND CONSPIRACY for National Geographic and the History Channel's ENGINEERING EVIL. Nelson also produced Werner Herzog's GRIZZLY MAN, the Oscar nominated ENCOUNTERS AT THE END OF THE WORLD, and CAVE OF FORGOTTEN DREAMS. He is currently producing and directing the feature documentary KUBRICK NAPOLEON, a collaboration between Creative Differences and the estate of Stanley Kubrick.

Mark Degli Antoni – Score

Mark Degli Antoni is a film composer & performer based in Los Angeles. His scores include CHERISH, MARIE & BRUCE, ROMAN POLANSKI: WANTED & DESIRED and most recently Werner Herzog's INTO THE ABYSS. The film KILLING IN THE NAME was nominated for a 2011 Academy Award. Mark is a founding member of the internationally acclaimed band Soul Coughing on Warner Records. He has collaborated with a wide range of musical artists including David Byrne, Laurie Anderson, Low, John Scofield & John Zorn. In addition he has provided music and sound for director Lily Baldwin and visual artists including Richard Prince, Julia Scher, Christian Marclay & Nam Joon Pike.

Joe Bini – Editor

Joe Bini has been working professionally as an editor for over twenty years, in both documentary and fiction forms. He is best known for his long-time collaboration with Werner Herzog, which extends through such notable documentaries as, LITTLE DIETER NEEDS TO FLY, MY BEST FIEND: KLAUS KINSKY, GRIZZLY MAN and CAVE OF FORGOTTEN DREAMS, and narrative films

such as RESCUE DAWN and THE BAD LIEUTENANT: PORT OF CALL NEW ORLEANS. INTO THE ABYSS is their 18th together. ROMAN POLANSKI: WANTED AND DESIRED, a film that Bini cut and co-wrote, won the Documentary Film Editing Award at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival and an Emmy Award for Outstanding Non Fiction Writing. He was awarded the Prix Vulcain De L'Artiste-Technicien at the 2011 Cannes film festival for his editing of WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN, directed by Lynne Ramsay and featuring Tilda Swinton.

Peter Zeitlinger – Cinematographer

Peter Zeitlinger is an accomplished filmmaker whose career encompasses cinematography, directing, writing and editing. Zeitlinger has been working with Werner Herzog since 1995 when he was director of photography on the director's documentary DEATH FOR FIVE VOICES. That film began an intensive collaboration that has yielded such documentaries as LITTLE DIETER NEEDS TO FLY, MY BEST FIEND, WHEEL OF TIME, and GRIZZLY MAN as well as the drama Invincible and RESCUE DAWN. His work has garnered a lot of awards and nominations.

Creative Differences

Creative Differences is a Los Angeles and Vancouver based production company. Over the past fifteen years, Creative Differences has produced a wide range of programming for an even wider range of television networks, including: HISTORY, A&E, Animal Planet, Discovery, National Geographic, Fox, CBS, MTV and PBS. The company has produced notable series such as "Unsolved History," "Time Warp," "Blood Dolphins" and "Megadisasters" as well as the feature documentaries *Grizzly Man* and the Academy Award®-nominated *Encounters at the End of the World*.

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CREDITS

Directed by
WERNER HERZOG

Director of Photography
PETER ZEITLINGER

Picture and Music Edited by
JOE BINI

Music Composed by
MARK DEGLI ANTONI

Produced by
ERIK NELSON

Executive Producers
DAVE HARDING
AMY BRIAMONTE

Executive Producers
for Investigation Discovery
HENRY SCHLEIFF
SARA KOZAK

Executive Producers
for Spring Films and Werner Herzog Film
ANDRE SINGER
LUCKI STIPETIĆ

Coordinating Producer
ROBERT ERICKSON

Additional Camera
DON FRIDEL
JERRY HATTAN
KEVIN O'BRIEN
DAVE ROBERSON
JAKE WILGANOWSKI

Production Sound
ERIC SPITZER

JEFF DUNCAN
RANDY FOSTER
MICHAEL LILE
AL MCGUIRE
STEVE OSMON

Assistant Camera
ERIK SOELLNER

Production Assistant
HARRY SCHLEIFF

Supervising Producer, Post Production
RANDALL BOYD

Post Production Coordinator
BERNIE LEINFELDER

Assistant Editor
ALEX BUSHE

Music Performed By
SEBASTIAN STEINBERG - guitars, contra bass
LISA GERMANO - violins
DAVID BYRNE - guitar
PETER BECK - winds
COLIN STEVENS - instrument design
MARK DEGLI ANTONI - keyboards, percussion

Post Production Mixer
MIKE KLINGER
Tree Falls Post

Digital Intermediate Colorist
SHERI EISENBERG
Colorworks

Digital Intermediate Conformist
JASON SAULOG
REZA AMIDI

Digital Intermediate Producer
MORNING STAR SCHOTT

Digital Intermediate Client Services
OLIVIA WARD

DCP Technical Supervisor
MICHAEL V. FERNANDEZ

Business Affairs
CYNTHIA SHAPIRO

Accounting
BILL HAYES
HONG LA

Special Thanks
TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE
MICHELLE LYONS
JASON CLARK
MAYA HAWKE
BOB BAILEY
NICK RASLAN

Produced in Association with
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Commissioning Editors, MORE 4
HAMISH MYKURA
ANNA MIRALIS

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SPRING FILMS Ltd.
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