

I, Claudia

A film by Chris Abraham and Kristen Thomson
Adapted and written by Kristen Thomson
Directed by Chris Abraham

(Canada, 2004, 75 minutes)

Distribution

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

Publicity

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

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

SYNOPSIS

I, Claudia is an adaptation of the hit one-woman play starring Kristen Thomson. Claudia is an “official” pre-teen, still reeling from her parents' divorce. Her father is getting re-married, she has a science fair project coming due, and she is in the physical and emotional throes of puberty. Claudia speaks to us from inside the boiler room of her school where she stores all the things that are secret and dear to her. Incensed and incredulous at the adult world around her, she is irrepressibly funny about it at the same time. Some important adults in Claudia's life - her grandfather Douglas, her father's new girlfriend Leslie and the school custodian Drachman - shed light on her situation.

Praise for the play *I, Claudia*

**** [Kristen Thomson] “a stupendous character actress....a heart-stoppingly honest comedian” ~ Kate Taylor, *The Globe and Mail*

**** “...blissfully funny, unexpectedly touching...a must see”
~ Richard Ouzounian, *The Toronto Star*

“...I laughed till I cried, though the chances are I would have cried anyway”
~ Robert Cushman, *The National Post*

I, Claudia from Stage to Screen

Kristen Thomson is growing accustomed to *I, Claudia*'s constant shape-shifting. The film's creator and star, Thomson developed the play from a 10-minute improv sketch she did in 1999, almost abandoning the entire idea because of a gut-wrenching lack of confidence moments before taking it on stage for the first time. Within two years, the 10-minute performance had become a full-length stage play at the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto, which charmed sell-out audiences and earned Thomson two 2001 Dora Mavor Awards for Outstanding New Play, and Outstanding Performance by a Female in a Principal Role.

Jennifer Kawaja and Julia Sereny of Sienna Films saw the play and loved it – it very much fit into the kinds of projects Sienna was drawn to producing, films such as *New Waterford Girl*, *Marion Bridge* and *Touch of Pink*, which are also about characters finding their own emotional truths. Bob Sherrin, commissioning editor of *Opening Night* at the CBC, was instrumental in initiating the film adaptation and financing its production.

Producer Julia Sereny recalls the moment when the curtain came down, “It was one of those experiences where theatre is everything it can be. Audiences were transported and people actually stayed around afterwards and discussed what they'd just seen. It was exceptional.” Jennifer Kawaja agreed that they had seen something wonderful. “We knew that it needed to be adapted for film in a manner that kept the essence of the play – its emotional integrity, simplicity and humour - intact.”

To make the transition from stage to screen, award-winning stage director Chris Abraham was the only person considered to helm the project. “This is Chris' directorial debut - for camera,” says Sereny. “Bear in mind he is already a very well established and respected theatre director. As the person who had developed and directed the play with Thomson, he was the perfect choice.”

The Characters

At the National Theatre School, Thomson had worked with a set of 26 masks created by the Anglo-Algerian designer, Abdel Kader Farrah. When she decided she wanted to write her own play, she revisited a character and a mask from the set of 26, which she had developed at NTS. This character, Claudia, was a pre-teen girl whose parents were divorced. "I thought about my own parents' divorce when I was 7 and how important that was to me. It was probably the point when I had my first adult experience and by that I mean the experience when you have to let go of the illusion of being safe. And that was my point of departure," Thomson says.

After presenting the 10-minute version of *I, Claudia*, Thomson had to develop the story to a full-length play. Having 'found' Claudia in this set of masks, she returned to the source to find additional characters. This is what Thomson discovered:

"When I found the Leslie mask, I thought she was funny, lively and I thought it was more interesting to have 'the other woman' and not Mom and Dad. I didn't want someone who was going to mitigate Claudia's experience. I wanted someone who would drive the stakes higher. Her mom and dad would try to help us understand why they split up while Leslie was there to antagonize us."

"Douglas is Claudia's grandfather and I loved that mask for his gentleness and perspective on life. For me, it was important to have an 83 year old character who had made it through all kinds of things in his life because for Claudia's situation, as dire as she felt it was, we see it in the context of someone else's life fully lived. Claudia's distress, while hugely important, is not the be all and end all of what she will experience in her life."

"The character of Drachman just cracked me up. He was an East European theatre director. At first, I didn't have a clue about how he was going to be involved in the play, but he had emigrated and was now the custodian at Claudia's school."

"The evolution to film has created a new kind of intimacy in *I, Claudia*" says Thomson. "It's a very small contained story that's really about revealing, through subtle narrative movements, the heart of a little girl."

The Actor and her Director

“When the Tarragon Theatre asked Kristen to develop the sketch into a play,” says Abraham, “she went away and produced 120 pages of wall to wall dialogue through improvisation. Then Kristen asked me to direct the piece and guide the project through its development phase. I worked with Kristen sharing conversations, noticing connections between scene, story and character. It was a magical process for me - to be around while Kristen was discovering the writer in herself.”

“Going to work with Kristen is a total thrill on so many levels”, Abraham continues. “As an actor one of her greatest talents is her honesty, her ability to get at the core of her characters’ experience and reveal their heart. This is an incredible gift to both the audience and any director working with her. My work helping Kristen shape the piece as play and film was rooted in our deep trust in each other - as artists and friends.”

Thomson responds in kind. “Chris is in every bit of the play, in every word of it, in every bit of improv behind it. He was the first person I showed the material to and I was so humiliated to share it. It was the first time I had ever written anything and it was so personal and such a huge risk to go from acting to creating something and performing it publicly. I thought I could not possibly go through with this, and Chris said, ‘You’re crazy. This is fine. You can perform this.’ Chris was put on this earth to direct. He has a fine eye for detail and a humane approach to the work that he does. I wanted someone I could trust that much to guide me through the process and he really did all that for me.”

The Masks - They Hide Something to Reveal Something

While masks are a distinctive element of the stage production of *I, Claudia*, they became a point of concern for the film version. Julia Sereny explains, “We were very conscious of the mask element, in particular the distance they create - and how that would play, or not play, on camera.”

In 2002 during the development process, Kawaja and Sereny helped to shape a process of work shopping the scenes on camera to see how the masks would work in the new medium. The workshops were invaluable. “What we found,” recalls Kawaja, “was that they did create a distancing effect, but that if we changed the masks, we were changing the characters. So we decided to use the originals - but with an eye to camera angles.”

Abraham explains this further, “Masks essentialize characters; they bring out the essence of a person. The transformation of Kristen into each of the four characters remains performance driven, but the filmic landscape the characters inhabit compliment and enliven the magic of the masks. We didn’t want to hide

how the masks worked, but we also wanted to avoid a self-conscious theatricality, preferring instead a kind of lyrical realism, which treated the characters as living subjects. The world created on screen is a hybrid of the real and the unreal - a tension between the theatricality of the masks and the realism of the film.”

The Documentary Interpretation: Addressing the 4th Wall

In the instance of the stage version of *I, Claudia* the fourth wall (the “imaginary” wall that divides the “reality” of the action onstage from those watching it in the audience) was, as it often is, broken down with very little problem. In fact Kristen’s masks helped bring the audience in to Claudia’s world, enabling the theatre to become “a common imaginative non-place” for viewer and character alike.

As a result, in the stage performance of *I, Claudia*, Kristen’s relationship with the audience forms a key part of the experience. “It’s about control of the audience” explains Abraham on the subtle charm of the play. “That was one of the important elements we were looking to access when we work shopped this on film. The viewing audience of the film isn’t implicated in the action of the story as it is in the theatre, but we wanted them to be.”

The challenge then became how to translate the intimacy of the theatre to the screen. Abraham explains the solution. “In the end, a quasi-documentary approach allowed each of the characters to relate to the camera with a spirit of improvisation. Kristen’s performance evolved to accommodate this new spectator – the camera. ”

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

KRISTEN THOMSON - Writer, Actor

Kristen Thomson has been hailed as "one of the finest new actors to hit the Canadian stage in a decade." She has won three Dora Mavor Moore Awards: two for *I, Claudia*, which has been presented at The Tarragon Theatre, Belfry Theatre, The World Stage Festival and has toured Hungary. Her third Dora was for Outstanding Performance in a Lead Role in "Problem Child."

Since graduating from the National Theatre School of Canada in Montreal in 1993, she has played a variety of roles, including a pot-smoking flirt in Shelagh Stephenson's "The Memory of Water" and a seductive beauty in Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya". Other theatre credits include "The Bald Soprano", "The Lesson", "School for Wives", "Streetcar Named Desire", "Skylight", "Great Expectations" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream".

While live theatre remains Thomson's passion, she joined director John Greyson for *Law of Enclosures* and again for *Proteus*, a fictionalization of an interracial, homosexual love affair between two prisoners in the early 1700s, filmed in South Africa. Thomson won a 2003 ACTRA Award for Outstanding Performance playing the lead in Sarah Polley's award-winning short film *I Shout Love*. She has also starred in *The Matthew Shepard Story* and Keith Behrman's *Flower & Garnet*, for which she won a 2003 Leo Award for Best Supporting Performance. Recently, Thomson guest starred on *The 11th Hour* and was featured in Deepa Mehta's *The Republic of Love*.

Kristen will soon appear in Soulepepper's "Mirandolina".

CHRIS ABRAHAM - Director

Chris Abraham is a director, designer, and dramaturg. He attended the University of Toronto Theatre Studies program before returning to Montreal to study directing at the National Theatre School of Canada. After leaving Montreal, he apprenticed with most of Canada's premiere theatre companies including the Canadian Stage Company, Theatre Passe Muraille and The National Arts Centre.

Among his many theatre directing credits, his favourites include: *I, Claudia* (Tarragon Theatre, winner of two Dora Awards), "The Glass Menagerie" (Saidye Bronfman), "Saltwater Moon" (Saidye Bronfman), "As You Like It" and "Twelfth Night" (Resurgence Theatre Company); "Boxhead" (Go Chicken Go) by Darren O'Donnell; "After the Dance" by Terrence Raddigan and "The Possibilities" by Howard Barker

(The Montreal Young Company- later awarded best new ensemble for 1999 by MEAC); "The Offering" (Moriah Productions) by Anton Piatigorsky (nominated for the 2000 Dora Mavor Moore award for Outstanding New Play- winning for Outstanding Lighting Design); "Easy Lenny Lazmon and the Great Western Ascension" (Moriah Productions/Go Chicken Go) by Anton Piatigorsky (nominated for nine 1999 Dora Mavor Moore awards, winning five including Outstanding Direction, New Play and Production and also nominated for the 1999 Floyd F. Chalmers award for Outstanding Play); "Lenz" (Go Chicken Go) by Georg Buchner- adapted by Chris Abraham (nominated for three 1999 Dora Mavor Moore Awards for Outstanding New Play, Performance by a Male and Lighting Design - winning in the category of Outstanding Performance by a Male); "Kaspar" and "Offending the Audience" (Go Chicken Go) both by Peter Handke; "Judith: a parting from the body" (Serious Cow) by Howard Barker.

Chris is the artistic director for Go Chicken Go, a highly lauded Toronto theatre company producing uncompromising versions of contemporary classics and the best in new experimental drama. He was the Associate Artistic Director of Bill Glassco's Montreal Young Company. He has held the position of Company Dramaturg for Toronto's historic Theatre Passe Muraille for three years and is a member of the Factory Theatre Director's unit. Chris was awarded the 1999 Ken MacDougall and John Hirsch awards for emerging directors. In 2001 Chris received the protégé portion of the prestigious Elinore and Lou Siminovitch prize won by Daniel Brooks. He currently sits on the Board of Directors for The Dora Mavor Moore Awards in Toronto.

Upcoming theatre projects include "The Unexpected Man" at the Tarragon Theatre, "Tales from Ovid" at the Centaur Theatre, and a project at the National Theatre School of Canada.

JENNIFER KAWAJA & JULIA SERENY - Producers

Jennifer Kawaja and Julia Sereny are the principals in Sienna Films, a Toronto-based film and television production company. Kawaja and Sereny are joined by Producer Brent Barclay and Associate Andrea Glinski.

Sienna Films' most recent theatrical release is *Touch of Pink*, a comic clash of cultures, values and sexuality, starring Jimi Mistry and Kyle MacLachlan. Their previous feature film was the family reunion drama *Marion Bridge*, directed by Wiebke Von Carolsfeld, written by Daniel MacIvor, starring Molly Parker and Rebecca Jenkins. Listed by the Toronto Film Festival as one of the top ten films of 2002, *Marion Bridge* was awarded TIFF's City TV Best First Feature Award before traveling the festival circuit in North America, Europe, the Far East and Australia.

Sienna Films also produced the sleeper hit of 1999, box office champion *New Waterford Girl*, a coming-of-age comedy directed by Allan Moyle, written by Tricia

Fish, starring Liane Balaban, Cathy Moriarty, Mark McKinney, Andrew McCarthy, Mary Walsh and Nicholas Campbell. *New Waterford Girl* enjoyed a healthy festival life at Sundance, Toronto and Rotterdam, and was nominated for seven Genie awards; it also won Best Canadian Feature, Best Produced Film and Best Sound Design at the 1999 Atlantic Film Fest, a Canadian Comedy Award, Best Canadian Film at Sudbury Cinefest and Liane Balaban won Best Canadian First Feature Film - Special Jury Congratulation at the 1999 Toronto International Film Festival.

Other features include: the whimsical family drama, *Saint Monica* directed by Terrance Odette, starring Brigitte Bako, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival and was in competition at Berlin 2003. *Saint Monica* won a Genie for Best Original Song and brought home three Leo Awards (Editing, Overall Sound, Sound Design); and the political thriller *April One* starring David Strathairn, Djanet Sears and Stephen Shellen.

Sienna Films' television productions include: the award-winning and internationally televised *Society's Child* starring Jessica Steen and Margot Kidder; *Sibs*, directed by Laurie Lynd, written by and starring Diane Flacks and Richard Greenblatt; *Dinner at the Edge*, written and directed by David New, which won the Chris Award at the 2000 Columbus International Film & Video Festival, and received two 2001 Gemini nominations for Best Performing Arts Program (or Series) and Best Sound. Sienna Films also produced *Black, Bold and Beautiful*, *Erotica*, *Hidden Children*, *Man Overboard* and *Confessions of a Rabid Dog*.

Sienna is currently in pre-production on the television movie *One Dead Indian*, based on the 1995 shooting of Dudley George, for CTV television. Also in development are several features and a dramatic mini-series, which looks at the high stakes world of the international diamond trade.

KIM DERKO - Director of Photography

Kim Derko was the cinematographer on *Youkali Hotel*, directed by David Morton, John Greyson's *Law of Enclosures*, Keoni Waxman's *Highwayman*, Duane Lavold's *Limp*, Christopher Grismer's *Clutch* and *Under My Skin* for HBO and *Wasaga* for Bravo. Derko also worked on *The Banishing*, *Show Me Yours*, *Serendipity*, *Crime Spree* and the television series, *Blue Murder III* and *IV*, *Relic Hunter*, *Soul Food* and *Queer as Folk*.

AIDAN LEROUX - Production Designer

Aidan Leroux was the production designer for the feature film *The Dark Hours*, directed by Paul Fox, Laura Teller's *Death and The Maiden*, Larry Weinstein's television special *Stormy Weather*, as well as *Le Mozart Noir* for director Raymond Saint-Jean. He also designed for *A.W.O.L.*, directed by Heidi Gerber, and *Why Don't You Dance*, directed by Michael Downing. Leroux was the art director on *Highwaymen*, directed by Robert Harmon, *Contagious*, and *Florida Jacks*, both directed by David Stein; the assistant art director on the feature film *Resident Evil*, and the television movies, *Celeste in the Sky* and *Icebound* and he was set designer for *Witchblade I* and *II*, as well as *La Femme Nikita* (season V).

DAVID WHARNSBY - Editor

David Wharnsby earned a 2004 Genie for Guy Maddin's *The Saddest Music in the World*, which showed to critical acclaim at Sundance, Venice and TIFF. Previous films include *Perfect Pie* with Barbara Willis Sweete, *The Newsroom* with Ken Finkelman, *Century Hotel* with David Weaver and *The Uncles* with Jim Allodi. David has collaborated with Rhombus Media on several television projects including *Elizabeth Rex*, *Foreign Objects*, *Don Giovanni* and *Yo Yo Ma: Bach Cello Suite* and has edited numerous short films directed by Jeremy Podeswa, Sarah Polley and Semi Chellas.

David is currently working on *The Newsroom* series for CBC.

CHRISTOPHER DEDRICK - Composer

A Toronto-based composer, arranger and conductor Chris Dedrick has amassed a body of work that encompasses hundreds of recordings and performances. Chris' career began in the late '60s, at the age of 19, as a singer and principal songwriter in sibling vocal group The Free Design, which produced seven albums between 1967 and 1973. Relocating to New York, Chris served as chief arranger for the U.S. Air Force's Airmen of Note in Washington, D.C., from 1969 to 1971 and contributed to recording sessions for artists as prestigious as Peter, Paul & Mary, Melissa Manchester, Barry Mann, and Simon & Garfunkel with James Taylor. Since moving back to Canada in 1972, Chris has established himself as one of the country's foremost composers and arrangers for television and film, earning a 2004 Genie for his original score for *The Saddest Music In the World*, and three Gemini Best Original Score awards for *Shipwreck on the Skeleton Coast* (1998), *The Road to Avonlea* (1997) and *Million Dollar Babies* (1996). He recently composed for the CBC miniseries, *Shattered City: The Halifax Explosion*, and the feature film *Childstar*, directed by Don McKellar.

In addition to the dozens of works he has composed for chamber ensembles, jazz bands, choirs and symphony orchestras, Chris is a major creative force behind several recordings and performances by the world-renowned Canadian Brass. Having arranged and composed selections from five of their 1990s albums, the Canadian Brass has turned in rapturously received concerts of Chris' suites *Mother and Child* (Hamilton, 1994; with the Bach-Elgar Choir) and *Fantasies for Anna* (Toronto, 1995). Chris also conducted the Canadian Brass and members of the New Philharmonic at the 1995 premieres of *Entre Nous* in Toronto and New York City.