

Lucky McKee Stands By His “WOMAN”

Written by Michael Gingold

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When filmmaker Lucky McKee teamed up with author Jack Ketchum on *THE WOMAN*, the big news was supposed to be that McKee—dismissed as director of the Ketchum movie *RED*—was able to see a project derived from the writer’s work to the end. But once *THE WOMAN* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival early this year, the key talking point became an audience member who vocally protested its excesses, his lengthy rant captured on a much-viewed YouTube video. McKee spoke with Fango about the flick, that particular non-fan and more...

A follow-up to the Ketchum-inspired/scripted *OFFSPRING*, *THE WOMAN* (opening at select theaters this weekend) sees the eponymous feral character (returning actress Pollyanna McIntosh) prowling the woods near a rural community when she’s captured by local lawyer Chris Cleek (Sean Bridgers). Imprisoning her in his cellar, Chris begins a campaign to “civilize” her consisting of all kinds of abusive treatment—with his son Brian (Zach Rand) as an enthusiastic participant—to the dismay of his wife Belle (McKee film regular Angela Bettis). In addition to scripting *THE WOMAN* with Ketchum, McKee (who also produced *THE LOST*, based on Ketchum’s book) authored a novel tie-in published earlier this year.

FANGORIA: I guess the first thing to talk about is the controversy over *THE WOMAN* that erupted after that Sundance incident.

LUCKY McKEE: At the time it was upsetting, because it was the first time I’d shown the film in public and I was worried that people would misinterpret my intentions with the film. That guy just fed right into that whole thing, but thankfully nobody got behind him. Somebody shot that video, it got up on YouTube and over 100,000 hits later, I had all this free promotion from

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somebody I didn't even know. So ultimately, it's been a really good thing for the film; it definitely helped spread word of mouth. I don't know if we'd be where we're at right now if it weren't for that eruption [*laughs*]. He kind of did the opposite of what he was intending to do.

{youtube}o3IUAZLB4JY{/youtube}

FANG: You mentioned that your intentions were misinterpreted. What exactly were your intentions, and how do you think they were misinterpreted?

McKEE: My intention was to make a frank and honest story about abuse, and in order to do that, you have to go to some really rough places. My buddy James Gunn said it best: It's like, Spielberg makes *SCHINDLER'S LIST*, it doesn't mean he condones genocide. He's showing the depths that people can sink to, and how scary the human monster is. I think American horror films in general are not as bold and harsh as they could be. It takes a lot more to get people's attention these days. But I don't believe this movie is any more hardcore than a lot of stuff that was made in the '60s, or especially the '70s.

FANG: Ironically, the scenes that guy seemed to object to the most, involving the sexual abuse of the Woman, are not nearly as graphic as they could have been.

McKEE: No, and I worked very hard to not make them exploitative. I'm definitely showing something rough, and it wasn't easy for me to film, but I think it shows how awful people can treat each other. This stuff is not just going on in movies, it's going on right next door to you. It's happening all over the place.

FANG: One impression you get from that video is that one of the things he's most upset about is the audience reaction. The film, has a satirical bent to it; perhaps that led people to laugh at the wrong places when they were watching it?

McKEE: I think what happened was, he didn't misinterpret my intentions, but misinterpreted their reactions. They weren't laughing because it's funny, they were laughing because it's

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absurd. They could not believe what they were seeing. What do people do when they're uncomfortable? They laugh.

FANG: How did you first team up with Jack Ketchum on this project?

McKEE: I was rooting around trying to get another Ketchum book called THE PASSENGER going, and I was introduced to [producer] Andrew van den Houten through him. Andrew wasn't able to pull off the project I was pitching him, but he was like, "I just finished [directing] this movie called OFFSPRING, and I want you to see what this actress Pollyanna McIntosh did, because I think we could do something more with her character." He brought me up to New York and showed me the film, and I thought Pollyanna was great, and I told them my idea of how to turn everything on its head as a way to continue the story. He and Ketchum both loved it, and Ketchum and I, over a scotch, decided we'd write both the book and the script together.

FANG: Is there a chance you still might do THE PASSENGER?

McKEE: Yeah, someday down the road...



FANG: When you and Ketchum were writing THE WOMAN, did you go back to his original OFFSPRING book to pick up ideas, or did you just start at the point where the movie ends?

McKEE: Obviously I had read OFFSPRING, and I had read OFF SEASON previously to that, so I was familiar with those. But the movie OFFSPRING ends differently from the novel; in the

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book, the Woman dies. But Andrew decided to keep her alive because he knew Pollyanna had done something really special. I just kind of picked up the slack from there.

FANG: Was this your first time writing a book?

McKEE: Yeah, it's definitely the first novel with my name on it. It was a really cool experience. I did the heavy lifting on the screenwriting side, Ketchum did the heavy lifting on the literary side, because we were playing to our strengths, but we had a fusion of styles that worked really well.

FANG: How did you work with McIntosh to develop the character of the Woman?

McKEE: She's amazing. She just went all the way. She just became this other being, and did a tremendous amount of research on her own. She gave me super-detailed notes on the book, super-detailed notes on the script. Any thoughts she had, I welcomed them, and we worked hard and tailored it to what we both thought this should be. It was a very collaborative experience.

FANG: THE WOMAN harks back to MAY, in terms of the way you engage the audience's sympathy for a female character who does some horrible things. A lot of that has to do with the way she runs into so-called “normal” people who are even worse than she is.

McKEE: Well, Pollyanna's character represents what humans came from—our more primitive selves, our animal selves. A lot of people have forgotten that we're all animals at our base. We have animal instincts.

FANG: It's great to see Angela Bettis back.

McKEE: Oh yeah, Angela's just a treat. Every time I work with her, she blows my mind. She's got such a gift. It's like, how different is her character in THE WOMAN as opposed to May? Or

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her character in SICK GIRL. It’s amazing, the range she has. I’m blessed to work with her.



FANG: Did you write Belle with her in mind?

McKEE: Yes. And she introduced me to Sean Bridgers, who plays Chris Cleek. It all happened really organically. They’d been friends for 10 years; Angela had been trying for all this time to get me to work with him, and we finally found the right part. He totally understood the approach I wanted to take with it, then took it further and made it even more three-dimensional than any of us could have imagined. It’s an amazing performance. He’s the nicest guy in the world, and he plays the most evil motherf**ker you’ve ever seen.

FANG: How about the kids? Was it difficult to find young actors who could enact this perverse scenario?

McKEE: Actually, the little 4-year-old girl, Shyla Molhusen, we discovered at a horror convention, at Texas Frightmare Weekend. We were at our table signing DVDs and stuff like that; my dad was sitting next to me, we had just finished writing the WOMAN script a couple of weeks before that, and he said, “Hey, look at that little kid over there. She kind of looks like the character you just wrote,” and I was like, “Oh my God, you’re right!” We just happened to be mutual friends with her parents, and six months later, this little girl ended up being in the movie. It was amazing. As far as Zach Rand, who plays Brian, the evil little shit—he came from our New York auditions, and he was the very last tape we watched. I was thinking, “Oh my God, we’re not gonna be able to find the right kid for this,” and then, lo and behold... I mean, this kid just killed it, he was effortless. We really lucked out.

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FANG: The final scenes of THE WOMAN are pretty gory and intense. Was there any concern that that might make it difficult to find distribution?

McKEE: It's not really *that* extreme, if you compare it to a lot of stuff that's been out in the last couple of years. I think people are imagining more gore than is actually there. I mean, it delivers, especially in those last 20 minutes, and in certain areas and pressure points throughout the film. I tried not to have just a repetitious gore factor throughout the movie, because if you overdo it, it loses its effect after a while. But yeah, I was concerned about being able to get an R rating, and that kind of stuff. But we got an R very easily, and we've been getting our classifications everywhere. People understand that there's actual technique behind all of it. It's not just shoving everything in your face.

FANG: Do you have any other horror projects you're working on right now?

McKEE: Yeah, but I can't really talk about them. I'm just writing right now, listening my gut, trying to find the next right thing.

FANG: Do you think you might collaborate with Ketchum again?

McKEE: Oh, absolutely. It was a dream to work together. We'd love to do it again, it's just gotta be the right project.