

Title: Francine
Country: USA, Canada
Runtime: 74min
Year: 2012
Format: HD, 16:9, colour.
Directors: Brian M. Cassidy & Melanie Shatzky, Pigeon Projects
<http://www.pigeonprojects.com/>
Producers: Joshua Blum, Katie Stern / Washington Square Films
<http://www.wsfilms.com/>
Starring: Melissa Leo, Keith Leonard, Victoria Charkut, Dave Clark, Dr. Mike Halstead
Sales agent: US, The Film Sales Company; ROW, Washington Square Films
Web: <http://www.francinethefilm.com>

Francine is the first narrative fiction feature from filmmaking pair Brian M. Cassidy & Melanie Shatzky, and it flows with a subtle, restrained intensity of visual style following one woman upon her release from prison. The title character (driven by Oscar-winner Melissa Leo's stunning performance) attempts to connect to her new environment, passing through surreal situations of isolated heavy metal concerts, evangelical roller skating, and teenagers playing asphyxiation games and takes on number of jobs working with animals. She forms a deeper connection with the animals she takes in than to any of the people reaching out to her, and the growing chaos of her mental state creeps in through affecting scenes with her growing, improvised family. Funny at times and filled with an austere curiosity, this film manages to be an engrossing study of one woman, which communicates an entire interior world with scarcely a line of dialogue. *Francine* had its world premiere in the Forum section of the Berlinale and will go on to a North American premiere at SXSW in March.

Muffin Hix:

Moving from your shorter and also the found footage projects, how did this develop as a narrative feature, and how much of what we see in the final film came out of the original scripting and how much was a collaboration on the development of this character.

Melanie Shatzky :

I think all of our filmmaking (we've also made a documentary feature), and this was our first go at a semi-narrative feature and all of our films do have something in common - we're really drawn to people's desperation and a very intense sense of emotionality that these people deal with and these creative ways in which they try and counter their own desperation. And with this one we wanted to create that about a woman. And for both of us, we've always found a refuge in animals, and we thought it was a really beautiful way for a woman to try and create a family for herself when she doesn't have any, because animals are this wonderful combination of the very wise and very naïve at

the same time. So you can build that kind of relationship with them, but that can also be abused.

MH:

And what a family she compiles!

Melissa Leo:

The dogs and the cats pretty much all came from a single home – a woman and her daughters who rescue animals and raise them in the house altogether. We were a little worried about them seeing how foul we were making everything look! But the animals were so well treated.

Brian M. Cassidy:

But in fact that also helped with the authenticity of what it would look like in someone's house at various stages. You know, for us it was very important – the way in which Francine's house becomes distressed is a marker of time. And it was very important for us to be able to build a very truthful and authentic reality of what that would be.

MH:

That was one of my favorite things in the film – to see that every time you cut back to the inside her house you see a few more animals, a few more things starting to pile up...

BMC:

Yep, it's very much a marker. It's the progression of the character. It's time. It's her mental state on display.

MH:

And the scenes with the vet? Where the dog is being euthanized and the cat, which is one of your stills, being spayed...

MS: Yes, the dog is being anesthetized because he was getting a procedure done – he was getting his teeth cleaned.

BMC: And in fact we had to take great care in those scenes to film as things were happening.

ML: They had visited and gotten to know the vet who kindly said 'sure come on in'. And so the woman shaves the cat lying there, and she goes and gets the dust-buster.

BMC: I've been looking forward to that moment in the theatre since we shot it. Yeah, it's one of those times where I've never seen a cat being dust-busted in a film before. That. Will. Be. In. The. Film. It's essential to the film. These are the wonderful kind of moments that we look for.

MS: That we never could have scripted.

BMC: But you get these gifts, and you use them.

MH: This film evolved in a way from your short film The Delaware Project.

<http://www.pigeonprojects.com/html/tdp.html>

MS:

That was kind of the inspiration for it. This went further and deeper, but it was only ten pages we had of synopsis, more like a treatment. And so, everything was improvised. We had the goal of the scene, where somebody was coming from, but that was pretty much it, and so there was all this room for creativity on Melissa's part and with the other characters. And so there were these very magical moment where Melissa was doing these things where she was so into the character...

BMC:

We conceive these ideas. We have them in our mind's eye. We know kind of what we want to express. But you don't have a movie unless you have its centre. And we had the wonderful fortune of working with Melissa on that, without whom this film would simply just not work – without Francine having the fullness. With a character that is drawn, in some ways seemingly, so spare... but not spare. There is so much depth, a richness... this is not something you can just give to anybody. Initially we thought perhaps we would use a real person in this role –

MH:

A real person?

BMC:

I'm sorry, a *non-actor*. And it just wouldn't have worked in that way. You really need *someone*.

MH: So, how did you come together on this?

ML:

They used to say in college, "We're actors. We're the opposite of people." So I don't take offense to that at all.

I heard from the Hudson Valley Film Commission, and they put up casting notices for someone who had come through the office. They had put up not a notice for Francine, but for the other characters around, with a description about a paragraph long of a somewhat wordless movie, telling a story in pictures, shot in the Hudson Valley in the Summer when I would be free – It's my own back yard. It sounded like a lot of fun and a really fascinating tale. And what an experiment that would be – to see if without too

many words we could tell a story. Because sometimes, *most* of the time, things are overwritten. Really the key in filming that gets so hard with an inexperienced person is that often you have to pare away so much. I had many, many films you've never heard of because too many stories are being told at once. So the clarity of their singularity of purpose told me (I hadn't seen any of their other work). I tend to breathe people in and see how that feels to me. And when I breathed them in I could tell they're true artists. How we would get there, I wasn't sure, but that we would be making art for a month in the Hudson Valley, it sounded like fun.

MH:

The setting was so amazing. You get a sense of place that is so familiar, but at the same time it is hard to pin down. You just get this North American *sense*...

ML:

It is a brilliant part of the filmmaking. I don't even know if they (Melanie and Brian) know the brilliance in it. Almost everything takes place within five miles. But every once in a while we're a good twenty miles away. The seamlessness, the specificity, that it is the Hudson Valley. I know every single inch of every single frame. And yet, you never see where you are. It never says Welcome to Ulster County. It never places you, so it's incredibly specific. And the more specific that filmmaking gets, the more universal it actually is.

BMC:

Yep. That's very very true. And that's precisely the question of withholding and showing and what you choose, it's very much for that, it's actually to get more specific by removing certain things. We're very much also interested to this point with Francine in present-tense filmmaking. It exists in an observable reality that happens in the present tense. For us that's very important.

ML:

This is then using film in a really great way. A lot of filmmaker *put* their movies in film. But this is *using* the medium to its fullest extent. And it's remarkable.

MH:

You have a scene where you come across a mosh pit out in the middle of a field. Were these people actually in this town?

BMC:

This was a construct. It was created. At first, I don't know if I should say, we had thought initially perhaps it would be more populated. But this is the wonderful thing, the gift you're given as a filmmaker that is open to possibilities. We had thought it should be a larger concert. We got there. We had who we had. And actually it was much truer. I'd been a musician for a number of years, and that's about the size of a lot of crowds that show up for bands in these areas. So it had such a surreal truth to it that was against our

pre-judgment that when we saw what we had to work with, we were just delighted, and it's better than we imagined it could have been. In casting the band, we were very intent on having a hardcore band. We wanted it to have that sort of primal energy, and a release. It's a shared release that Francine feels, and that kind of aggression was very important. They're a band called Snapping from Kingston.

MS:

And those are their real fans. They were very excited to go to this free concert.

ML:

And they played and played. Again it is such an unusual way that they shot. The recording of sound for Francine is a miracle of filmmaking. Where sound is so often disregarded on the set – and here Brian would just keep shooting through everything. But it was almost as if the sound didn't matter to them, and I didn't understand it. I said it's their film, okay. And then the sound in the film is *so great*. So here again we're shooting the band, and the band is playing and playing, and they're not even shooting the band. They're shooting me walking towards it. Why are they making them play? But you see Francine is really seeing it. She's *really* hearing it. That is not a dropped-in track later on. That's them playing in the distance while he's shooting me.

BMC:

And the richness, for me, of a good film is when things happen outside of the frame. You know, you're making fiction work, and you have to get over the documentary truth of it. It's a construct. But at the same time I think there's really something in having things happening within the environment. Like food in the refrigerator, even if the refrigerator isn't going to be opened. I think that creates an atmosphere and an environment.

MS:

And I think this speaks to our photography background too. Because I think when you look at singular images, it's so much about what's outside the frame. So much about what you're *referencing* outside the frame. And I think often in filmmaking, the tendency is often what you see inside the frame at any given moment. So we come at it from a different perspective.

BMC:

It's as much of a concern of ours, the sound, as the picture. *Storytelling* sound. The musicality of sound. All these things, it's as important as the picture – as any ingredient.

MH:

And the music you've used was just spot-on all the way through.

ML:

The music in the DMV office. Again, we were shooting there, and I was thinking 'oh geeze, what are they going to do with sound' - and they just kept the mic open, and

you have miles and miles of the busy DMV. And there you have the scene. The soundtrack says so much about the busy working world, and she's in there and doesn't know how to fill out the form. It's not that she doesn't know how to fill out the form – it's information that she'd rather not give.

BMC:

There's a moment in the film that I love. It's when Francine is on the bus, and it's right before she arrives in the pet store. And she collects herself, takes a breath, and exhales. And as she exhales, the bus goes *pssssssss*. And it's - we've used sound in ways that for a character that does not use her own vocal cords or speak that much, that she's having a communion. At times the environment is working against her and it's oppressive to her, and sometimes it's on her side. These are things that are perhaps very subtle, but very important to us that they come across.

MH:

You're both involved in every aspect of the filmmaking process, but how big is the rest of your team?

MS:

It depended on the day. Some days had up to 25-30 people. Other days maybe 15.

BMC:

And I would argue some of the best moments, it was just the three of us, and sometimes just the two of us; just Melissa and I in the room and Melanie on a monitor outside. And we shot in a very very intimate way in which there was no what they call 'video village', which is producers and people looking at a monitor all the time and commenting. So I think that created a shared kind of intimacy that was really brilliant. But it's different. Melanie and I are used to working in private – just the two of us working on things. And so to be working with other people it was extraordinary to have this extra help, but at the same time it took us a while to figure out how to delegate.

END.

Filmography:

Brian M. Cassidy & Melanie Shatzky

Francine / 74 min / Fiction / 2012 / Berlinale, SXSW

The Patron Saints / 72 min / Documentary / 2011 / Rotterdam, Toronto

God Provides / 9 min / Documentary / 2007 / Sundance, Rotterdam, Toronto, SXSW

The Delaware Project / 14 min / Fiction / 2007 / Rotterdam, Edinburgh, Chicago

Fish Kill Flea / 51 min / Documentary / 2007 / SXSW, Milan

teaser clip imbed code from the filmmakers' vimeo:

<iframe

src="http://player.vimeo.com/video/35799168?title=0&byline=0&portrait=0&color=ffffff" width="400" height="300" frameborder="0" webkitAllowFullScreen mozallowfullscreen allowFullScreen></iframe><p>FRANCINE: CLIP (LARGE) from Pigeon Projects on Vimeo.</p>

