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DE PALMA - Noah Baumbach & Jake Paltrow



Noah Baumbach and Jake Paltrow's Cinephile Doc 'De Palma' Reveals Director's Secrets, Regrets and Indie Origins

“The Hollywood system destroys creativity,” Brian De Palma tells us in Noah Baumbach and Jake Paltrow’s documentary. That’s not the first nor the last of the impassioned statements the director makes throughout the course of the film, which feels less like a retrospective and more like a cinephile confessional. “It’s in the same spirit as having coffee with him,” said Paltrow. That is, if you take your coffee blood red.

Unlike most movies about directors - really, unlike most movies about famous people - Baumbach and Paltrow keep us squarely in De Palma’s subjectivity. The only interview subject is De Palma himself, because the directors “didn’t want to affect Brian with people talking about him,” said Paltrow.

“It wasn’t about trying to get answers out of him that we already had in our head,” said Baumbach. “We were trying to tell it the way he wanted to tell it.”

De Palma, featured in one protracted shot, tells the labyrinthine story of his career with charisma. “The thing we were most struck by was how electric Brian was on camera, how good he was at telling these stories, how he told them exactly the same way on camera as he would at dinner, and was so articulate,” said Paltrow.

As we time travel from set to set over the span of De Palma's five-decade career, the story organically pauses to examine major themes, such as the director's portrayals of women, the merits of low-budget filmmaking and the perils of studio contracts. "The story of the film industry is baked into Brian's experience," said Baumbach. "He has worked pretty much in every possible way: he's worked independently, he's worked on huge studio movies, he's worked on personal movies within the studio system, he's come onto movies after another director left. He's done so many versions of what can happen professionally in Hollywood."

"People don't understand that directors don't plan their careers," says De Palma at one point in the film. "We do the thing we can do at the time and start from scratch many times over."

When asked about De Palma's influence on his career, Baumbach retorted, smiling, "Isn't it obvious?" He continued: "I remember hearing about Brian's movies before I saw them, because my parents loved his movies and would talk about them a lot. There was something even about the way you talked about them that was just shocking and alluring and interesting." By the time Baumbach was old enough to start seeing De Palma's movies, he "felt like I was kind of being let in on some secret. It felt like some dark version of the adult world."

De Palma, for his part, owes a significant creative debt to Alfred Hitchcock. In the documentary, De Palma directly outlines, shot by shot, the visual references and techniques in suspense that he borrowed from the director. In fact, De Palma considers himself the only "practitioner of the Hitchcock school," words he proudly wields in his film. "I like Brian's thing about Hitchcock being a language," said Paltrow. "It's such a defined style, such a defined approach to making stories. You know, Brian probably is the strongest Hitchcock linguist."

Studio veteran influences aside, one of the most surprising revelations of "De Palma" is the extent of the director's stalwart low-budget conviction. "What's the point of film school if kids don't learn how to create low-budget movies?" De Palma asks in the film. Clashes with studios, such as Columbia and Paramount, further highlight his commitment to his vision. But what stands out most is one of the most original films any low-budget guru has ever attempted. "I always knew about 'Home Movies,' but in going through the timeline of his career, I guess I never quite thought about how idiosyncratic it was," said Baumbach of De Palma's scrappy 1980s endeavor. De Palma, who was fresh off the success of "Carrie" and "The Fury," made "Home Movies" with his students at Sarah Lawrence —and actually managed to release it. "It doesn't actually seem out of line with the career; it actually seems very much in line with it," Baumbach continued. "I still don't know any other filmmaker who's done something like that."

Throughout the film, De Palma speaks candidly of his confrontations with failure. Embedded within every film is a colony of mistakes, regrets and blunders De Palma is quick to detail. "Your films are like a public record of things you didn't finish," he says. For Baumbach and Paltrow, De Palma's oeuvre is treasure trove of opportunity. "I think the best one is probably 'Blow Out' if I have to give an answer, but that's just my answer today and I'm not sure if I would say that another day," said Paltrow. "My personal favorite is 'Carlito's Way,'" he added.

Baumbach was unable to choose a favorite, comparing the task with choosing a favorite of his own films. "There's something about all of them that, depending on the day or the moment, I feel a relationship with," he said. "And in a way it's so much about how we feel about him, too."

Emily Buder - September 22, 2015 - Indiewire

Source : <http://www.indiewire.com/2015/09/noah-baumbach-and-jake-paltrows-cinephile-doc-de-palma-reveals-directors-secrets-regrets-and-indie-origins-57635/>