

The AFI FEST Interview: ALWAYS SHINE Director Sophia Takal

Description

Sophia Takalâ??s sophomore feature follows two friends, Anna and Beth, both actresses with varying degrees of success, as they travel to Big Sur for a weekend getaway in hopes of reconnecting and reestablishing a bond broken by years of competitiveness and jealousy. Once away, tension bubbles to the surface, forcing them to finally confront their issues â?? and to lose grasp of their own identities in the process. Building on the theme of jealousy that permeated her debut feature GREEN, Takal explores the nature of female friendships and what it means to be feminine in the eyes of others. Mackenzie Davis and Caitlin FitzGerald sink their teeth into the roles of Anna and Beth, straddling a delicate line between melodrama and realism. Reminiscent of films like Robert Altmanâ??s 3 WOMEN (1977) and other films about â??psychotic womenâ?• from the 1970s, ALWAYS SHINE is a modern take that marks Takal as an important filmmaker to watch.

AFI spoke with Takal about the film, her second at AFI FEST after 2011â??s GREEN.

AFI: Did ALWAYS SHINE come out of wanting to explore the theme of jealousy â?? which you examined in your previous film GREEN â?? further?

Sophia Takal: Sort of. GREEN was a very personal exploration of my own issues around jealousy, friendship and sexuality. I worked through those issues with GREEN, and they no longer have the same stranglehold on me. But new issues cropped up. Instead of feeling threatened in my romantic partnership, I felt very threatened by other womenâ??s career successes. Right around when GREEN came out, a lot of my friends started working more as actors and directors and I got very, very competitive.

The idea for the film came from this insane competitiveness that took over me. I became obsessed with my career and felt an insane pressure to be â??femininеâ?• â?? shy, deferential. I traced all of those fears back to early memories of childhood where I felt that Iâ??d been shamed for not embodying these stifling notions of what it was to be a woman.

I started talking more about my feelings of inadequacy as a woman with friends and realized that no one I knew felt like a â??womanâ?• in the way we were taught to feel, either. ALWAYS SHINE began as a desire to examine the negative impact that these very confining ideas can have on a

womanâ??s psychology.

ALWAYS SHINE
ALWAYS SHINE

AFI: This film is reminiscent of the â??psychotic womenâ?• films of the 1970s. Did you have any of those films in mind when making this? What influenced you while making the film?

ST: Definitely! Robert Altmanâ??s 3 WOMEN was a huge inspiration as was his film IMAGES â?? as were Ingmar Bergmanâ??s PERSONA, John Cassavetesâ?? A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE and Lynn Ramsayâ??s MORVERN CALLAR.

Lawrence Levine, the screenwriter, read a number of books about celebrity obsession, narcissism and feminism. Books we referenced frequently were â??Down from the Pedestalâ?• by by Maxine Harris and â??Fame Junkiesâ?• by Jake Halpern.

AFI: While you played one of the leads in GREEN, here you stayed behind the camera. Talk about that decision, and how you found Mackenzie Davis and Caitlin FitzGerald.

ST: Deciding not to be in the film was something that I thought about for a long time. Ultimately, I didnâ??t feel like I would be making the film better by acting *and* directing. To me, the joy of acting is losing myself in a character; being a director makes that an impossibility. Iâ??m always worried about the camera, or the other actorsâ?? performances. When Mackenzie said she wanted to be in the film, I knew that I found someone who would be infinitely better at bringing Anna to life than I would have been.

I cast Mackenzie and Caitlin the â??traditionalâ?• way, through agents and casting directors. It was important to me to work with actors I had never worked with before. I wanted to challenge myself to be a sharper communicator and better director and I thought that by casting such talented actors, whom I didnâ??t know, I would be encouraged to do the best I could.

ALWAYSSHINE_web_3

AFI: As someone who has worked both in front of and behind the camera, how do you approach your actors? Does being an actress yourself help with this process?

ST: Being an actor definitely helps with this process. I canâ??t imagine knowing how to direct actors without experience as an actor myself. Acting is such a vulnerable, exposing process. I think all directors should learn acting as part of their training.

This was a very intimate shoot with a lot of intense, emotionally complex scenes, so it was important to me to create a very relaxed, collaborative environment. We did meditation and acting warm-ups with the cast and crew. Breaking the barrier between the cast and crew was especially important. I wanted the actors to feel free to fail and to explore and play and I felt that by bringing the crew into the process (with warm-ups), the actors would feel safer. We did a week of rehearsals, too, which helped Mackenzie and Caitlin get to know each other.

ALWAYS SHINE screens Tuesday, November 15 as part of New Auteurs.

Category

1. #AFI
2. #AFIFEST
3. Hollywood

Tags

1. AFIFEST 2016 presented by Audi
2. Always Shine
3. Art
4. Big Sur
5. Cinema
6. Competition
7. Conversation
8. entertainment
9. Film
10. Film Festival
11. Filmmaking
12. photography
13. Programming
14. Society
15. Women
16. writing

Date Created
November 14, 2016
Author
hollywoodglee