

The Making of *Tomato Red*: An Interview with Director Juanita Wilson

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Abstract

Juanita Wilson is a Dublin-based Film Director and Writer. In 2008, she was nominated for an Academy Award for her short film, The Door, which went on to win the IFTA Award for Best Short Film. She was awarded the prestigious Katrin Carlidge Foundation Bursary at the Sarajevo Film Festival in 2009. Juanita's first feature, As If I Am Not There, adapted from the work by Slavenka Drakulic, won the IFTA Awards for Best Film, Best Director and Best Film Script in 2011. She was selected by Variety as one of the Ten Directors to Watch in 2011. She developed and produced Inside I'm Dancing (2004) and H3 (2001). Juanita's latest film is Tomato Red, based on the novel by Daniel Woodrell.

Q: *What drew you to telling this story?*

A: Sammy's voice is immediately arresting in its honesty and humour. He has a skewed view of the world – a hard lived philosophy on life – and a strong moral code. But most of all, his humour makes you laugh out loud, even while you are acknowledging the truth of his views. At its heart, the story is about injustice and trying to right a wrong, which is something I feel compelled to add my voice to. Daniel's novel was inspired by a vicious murder that happened in the Ozarks of a young, gay man and this is what sparks the events in the story. I also love the relationships in the story, how each character relates to one another and both attacks and defends themselves through humour – like animals living in the wild, the cruel to be kind instincts of a lioness to her cubs, the teenage anger at being denied opportunities, at the unfairness of life, how the story twists and turns and outsmarts your expectations or clichés. I am drawn to stories that explore violence and helplessness, and how we respond as human beings trapped in difficult circumstances and what we do to try and preserve our sanity and humanity. In this case, looking at a young man's relationship to violence, to wanting to be a so-called hero and finding himself helpless and unable to articulate this helplessness; I find that incredibly honest and moving. And the build-up of rage that happens when people aren't included, welcomed, listened to, encouraged. I love the

way there is no one simple antagonist, instead it is a system that in order to preserve its power, sacrifices the weakest element. And the brutal ending is true and uncompromising, and this gives the story its power.



Q: Will you describe the creative process of *Tomato Red* from conceptualisation to the final cut?

A: Reading certain books for the first time, I instantly know that I am gripped by a desire to put this story on a big screen for an audience. With this book, that feeling came from the first sentence. I had a palpable feeling of love and sadness as I read Sammy’s words, and entered the world of Venus Holler and heard the different voices and dreams of the characters who live there. The way Daniel Woodrell uses language to describe life is breathtaking – I was constantly laughing as I read each sentence despite the difficult subject matter at times and was deeply moved. And the element of surprise he brings to his stories makes it so fresh, you literally do not know what will happen next, how the story will end, though you so desperately hope it will work out for the characters you have come to love and care about so deeply. So, needless to say, the end was like a punch in the stomach.

Once I read the book, we enquired about buying the film rights which at the time were not available, so I worked on adapting another of Daniel’s novels *The Ones You Do* - a great, epic story of family and justice. But when the rights to *Tomato Red* became available a couple of years later, we pounced and fortunately Daniel granted us the rights which was such an honour and a privilege. Adapting the book was frustrating at first, as the first drafts

of the screenplay were nowhere near as good as the novel, but eventually, working through all the material and shaping it for a cinematic experience, I came to the draft that we filmed. Working with Daniel was great because he was open to change if I felt it was necessary, though in the end, the film is very much the spirit of the novel, no changes were necessary.

Casting took some time; initially we found Julia Garner as Jamalee and Nick Roux as her younger brother Jason and were really excited, particularly at the chemistry between these two which must work in order for them to be convincing as siblings. Finding their nemesis, Sammy, took longer as the qualities he embodied were complex – gritty, masculine, rough, intelligent, reckless but responsible, young but older than his years... but when I saw Jake Weary's audition, I had this quiet excitement inside me, a feeling of knowing or recognising something – the same feeling I had when I first set eyes on Natasha Petrovic who played Samira in *As If I Am Not There* – there was a simplicity, a cleanness, an honesty that required nothing more – an ability that they both have to embody the character in everything they do – the tilt of a head, a blink or turn away, how they hold themselves, there is a truth in the body that can't lie – words can say anything but our bodies always betray our true feelings. And Anna Friel – she just had all the qualities for Bev – grit, fun, smart, pragmatic and gorgeous – she was a complete revelation for that role. And the chemistry between her and Jake was fantastic. She also brings an inherent vulnerability to the roles she takes on that gives them such dimension and depth.

The next key decision was the cinematographer and I had been tracking a relatively young Irish cameraman Piers McGrail since seeing a beautiful short film he shot some years back. He has an incredible eye and brings this to all his work. He is a master of framing and composition which for me are the key in terms of choosing pictures to tell your story. Beyond this, he was an ally in all our challenges in terms of finding the best locations and going the extra mile to deliver the absolute best in terms of quality. It was exciting to explore images and ideas with him and build up an aesthetic for the film.

In terms of shooting, the original story was set in a small town, but I felt that nowadays, there wouldn't be the same level of isolation in a town in terms of opportunities, employment, community and support that you might find in the middle of a vast mountain range so, after much location scouting, we placed them on the outskirts of a small town in the middle of nowhere, with mountains stretching into the distance as far as the eye can see. Opportunity is never going to come knocking here any time soon, and it's important to show that visually. Jamalee really is trapped. But the landscape itself is incredibly beautiful too, which is important, that the circumstances they face are tough but their world is colourful, not grim. And they are outsiders, literally, on the edge of the town, on the fringes of society. We can see that from the location which becomes almost a character in the film.

Once these key decisions were decided, we headed out for the ten weeks – five weeks to prep and five weeks to shoot – which is relatively short. The shoot was intense and challenging as always on a production that is ambitious and modestly funded but as we were all holed up in the one small hotel in the town where we were filming, we became close very quickly and had a lot of fun together and this really boosted morale amongst the cast and the crew. And having Daniel come and spend time with us on set was very emotional for me and for the actors, just being around the man who had created all of this and being able to share our excitement and appreciation of him and his work was profoundly moving. The absolute sadness and emotion involved with the scene where they discover the body was hard on everyone, but afterwards we knew we had something really special. And the joy of shooting the pigs scenes was definitely one of the highlights!

Back in Dublin, the rushes were in the safe hands of editor Nathan Nugent who I have worked with on all three films, and the editing process is where the real storytelling gets honed. It is wonderful to have someone where there is complete trust so that you can be brutally honest with what you have and what you are doing, and rigorous in all your choices. Nathan and I both have a ruthless streak and are quick to discard anything we feel is not serving the pace of the story. But in this case, bizarrely, we found that we were too ruthless at first and needed to build the story back up so we ended up using pretty much all the set ups that we shot. And Nathan has a great ear for music, so he interwove some of the scenes into montages with the haunting music of Dustin O'Halloran's *A Winged Victory for the Sullen* which create some of the most memorable moments from the film. Irish musicians, Kevin Murphy, Thomas Haugh and Stephen Shannon created the score which sets the tone for the film with its raw cello and dark undernotes and very much contributes to the film's personality. The sound editing was also very creative in building up the atmospheres in the locations and the scenes. Seeing it all develop and come together in the end is exhilarating. There is always a distinct point in the post production process where you feel the film has found itself – has become its own distinct thing with its tone and rhythm that is inescapable, its essence and then you feel your job is almost done. Watching the film with its first audiences is nerve wracking, particularly a film like this that is uncompromising in its honesty and goes against the herioc Hollywood template, so it was great that the film played so well and was so well received. A recent highlight was watching it at the Newport Beach Festival just outside Los Angeles which was its first north American audience and seeing the humour play so well, in addition to the dramatic moments. It was particularly meaningful having lead actors Jake Weary and Nick Roux there with their entire families in the audience, it made it very special and personal and a way to celebrate their talent.

Q: What was the biggest challenge in making the movie?

A: There were several big challenges – choosing the actor to play Sammy was definitely one and choosing the location that portrayed the spirit of the story was definitely another. Setting the tone of the film was also of huge significance – balancing the need for portraying reality and truth with the colour and playfulness of the story and of the writing. Other than those big ones, there were several other significant challenges on a daily basis but such is the nature of shooting!

Q: How close is the final film to your initial vision of what it would be?

A: It's funny; you start out with a commitment to the material, rather than a developed idea or vision of a finished film. I would always have visual references as I develop a project, usually photographs and music that capture the spirit of the story, or the characters, but there isn't an overall blueprint or manual that you are trying to follow. My approach would be to explore all the possibilities, to examine and question options, to look and keep looking until you find the components that feel right – whether that's the actors or the locations or whatever. Throughout the process, you try and maintain the emotional honesty of the characters and their journeys, you try and make strong pictures, the strongest you can find, you defend the parts of the story you find most important – its originality, its truth, certain humour and dialogue, the key moments you feel move you and make the story resonate for you, but it's in abstract ways rather than a clear picture. Much like a recipe – you pick the best ingredients you can find to get the flavor you want, but the finished dish is a complete revelation. It always feels like it becomes a film, a thing in its own right, thanks to each of the individual choices you made, but when you are making them, they are just simple

choices, it's when you put all the parts together that you get a film. It's always surprising to some extent, but in a good way!

Q: How do you know when your film is finished and when to walk away?

A: When you've exhausted all the options and feel you have tested all the possibilities and each moment feels right. The questions in your head fall silent and you can just sit back and watch it and it does what you intended it to do. When you know you've found the code to unlocking the emotion and impact you want, that it's visually as strong as it can be and that it moves you. And that it's the best that it can be, regardless of any constraints you've had to deal with.

Q: What universal themes are explored in your film?

A: Violence, helplessness, a need to belong. My films always involve people looking for a home, in its deeper sense, of creating a family rather than the one they were born into, about people struggling against circumstances not of their choosing, and having to choose their response, whether that is through ritual, dignity, denial, rage, love or violence. Ultimately they're all about love in all its forms. When our backs are to the wall, we find out who we really are. What our humanity is.

Q: How important is the background score in engaging the audience?

A: Music is so important in films, but I am very resistant to anything overly sentimental or manipulative so how much and when you use it is critical. In this case, the score sets the tone of the film which is very particular and distinct. Often I use music after dramatic moments, rather than during it, in the moments where the character and the audience are processing something that just happened, and I think music is incredibly powerful when used in this way. It opens us up emotionally and instantly transports us to a place that would be difficult or impossible to create with words.

Q: What does the film say about the world we live in?

A: The film reflects the world we live in in a number of ways. Violence begets violence, sustained injustice provokes a negative reaction, that if people don't have a voice, are excluded from society, denied opportunity or justice, sooner or later they will find another way to have their voices heard. I think this is the core message underlying the story, which is very relevant and timely.

Q: How much do you have to compromise as a filmmaker because of budget and financial restrictions?

A: Far too much! In truth, some restraints cause you to have to rethink or reimagine elements of the story and often this produces a new creative solution so it's not always negative. But the main thing that financial restrictions impacts on is the time you have to film, and the less time you have, the less detail you can film, so you have to really try and fight against the story becoming too linear and thin, to film enough detail to allow the story to breathe and to build up atmospheres. And you want to give as much time as you can to your actors to do their job and make sure you can capture everything you need in terms of the emotional truth of the story. Often this is in the characters' reactions rather than actions, so this must be factored into the schedule or stolen from other scenes. You want the film to be as rich as

possible and to have options in the edit room to heighten certain moments if you feel it's appropriate. And moving the camera greatly increases the time spent filming a scene, so if you have limited time, it often limits the complexity of the shots. But again, this enforces a simplicity of style which can add to the story telling, and you can concentrate on creating beautiful or striking frames and compositions.

Q: What is your philosophy in life that influences your creative work?

A: The key theme in my films is resilience, surviving difficult events and finding a way to continue, not just to live but to continue to be human; to not be destroyed or embittered. So although the subject matter can be very dark at times, the message is that we can survive. To connect with our humanity. And not simply in a heroic way where we have the power as an individual to overcome negative events or turn them around, but that we have enough love and compassion and intelligence in our hearts to survive, to connect and find meaning in our lives. In the last moment of each of my films, the main character chooses one simple act and this act determines their future. However, in the case of *Tomato Red*, it is more a tragedy in the classical sense, but still the main character decides to act, rather than be a victim and remain passive. There is also always a strong connection to home or search for home, for belonging, for family at the heart of each of the films as well as dealing with loss. In short, we need to connect with our humanity. We need to respect one another and listen to each other. And ultimately, love is stronger than hate.

Q: Why do you think there are so few women in filmmaking?

A: There are many, many women in filmmaking but often they don't get their voices heard. The statistics are shocking. This imbalance is starting to be addressed in terms of specific support to address prejudice against women writers, directors and producers which is to be welcomed. Women are breaking down the myths about the types of stories they want to tell, and their work often accesses huge audiences. The industry is slowly waking up to this. I think the main thing is for women to keep pushing the boundaries in terms of subjects, genres, approaches and all forms of story-telling. Commissioners and financiers are traditionally conservative and maybe see women's choice of subject matter or approach as minority or non-mainstream, and that it therefore poses a bigger risk. But consistently films and recent drama series challenge that assumption and prove themselves at the box office. And as in all areas of industry, the more support we get as working parents, the more we can actively participate in the industry and focus on the demanding pressures of film making.

Q: Who is your dream artist you would like to collaborate with?

A: Roy Andersson. He has such an original voice, he is a beautiful visualist and his work contains such truth and humour. You can't put it into words. It just instantly creates an inner smile. I admire someone who can create such a bold vision and then has the personality and means to carry it through so excellently. His palette and visuals are so controlled and composed, and his characters and situations are full of irony and truth. He is kind to our flaws and weaknesses but is not afraid to confront our darkness as human beings. His work is so particular to his mind and personality. No one else could create what he creates. I love that. I can't imagine what a film collaboration between him and me would be like, but hopefully it would at least have an audience of two!

Q: Do you find the process of working with other collaborators difficult or essential (or both)?

A: Collaboration is the essence of filmmaking and it is in the sharing of creativity and skills that a film can really reach its full potential. I believe that a strong core team – writer, director, producer, cast, cinematographer, editor – creates a strong film. If any one of those elements does not have its own independent voice, the whole film suffers as a result. It's through honest and open collaboration that ideas can really grow and a vision can be realised. That it can become bigger than a sum of its parts. And it is the nature of working closely with other creative people that makes filmmaking joyful. It is the most exciting, challenging, vulnerable relationship you can have, and drawing on other people's experience and skills and creative ideas is a privilege. A film depends on so many people's input and skills, it's incredible. Each tiny decision makes an impact on the film. So it is an especially intense experience and yes, dealing with so many people will naturally have some inherent challenges, but overall, it is wonderful to be part of the talent and commitment of all the participants. To be saved from some of your worst ideas and mistakes and be a part of something greater than your own limited imagination and experience is truly humbling.

Q: *What kind of cinema or direction style do you like?*

A: I love films that bypass your brain and stir up something deeper inside you. *Nostalghia* by Tarkovsky is incredibly beautiful and mysterious and works on some deeper level, Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Uzak* is a deceptively simple study of loneliness and longing, the mood and theme of Paolo Sorrentino's *Great Beauty* can't be described in words, Bennett Miller's *Foxcatcher* is a masterpiece of cinema, Paddy Breathnach's *Viva* is an incredibly moving celebration of the human spirit; stories where peoples' inner lives and feelings are revealed without words. Where you have time to discover and process a deeper meaning, to read the images and appreciate the frame. Animations like the brilliant *Spirited Away* that are breathtaking in their execution and imagination, and films like *Team America* that are so funny, irreverent and necessary are pure genius.

Q. *What would you like to do in filmmaking that you haven't yet done?*

A. Break \$100,000,000 at the box office!

Q. *Do you like attending screenings of your own work?*

A. It's a privilege to sit with an audience and watch the film together, though it is like an Olympic Sport! It's exhausting! Trying to divine if the audience is enjoying it! So afterwards, it is always a great relief to hear their comments and feedback and hopefully to spark a debate about the themes and subject matter.

Q. *What are you working on next?*

A: I have just adapted a truly amazing memoir of a young American woman, Artis Henderson, about her short, beautiful relationship with her husband Miles, before he died in a helicopter crash in Iraq at the age of twenty-five and how she had to rebuild her entire life and find new ways to give her life meaning. It encompasses my two favourite themes, love and war and is incredibly moving and uplifting. I also am hoping to film Selina Guinness's original, Irish memoir, *The Crocodile by the Door*, about taking on the restoration of her uncle's house and estate after his death and having to find a way to hold on to it and turn around its fortunes in the shadow of the property developers at the height of the Celtic Tiger. It is symbolic of Ireland as a whole at that time, and again, is incredibly honest and moving and empowering. And there are lots of lambs in it, what better symbol of innocence and

hope?! Both stories again touch on the themes I love and show how even though the human spirit is profoundly tested, the heart comes through beating stronger and louder than ever.