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Legend on a Mountain

Writer/director John Stimpson talks about his film "The Legend of Lucy Keyes" based on a true story of a disappearing girl from the woods of Wachusett Mountain in 1755.

By David Tamés



Cassidy Hinkle as Lucy Cooley and Julie Delpy as Jeanne Cooley in "The Legend of Lucy Keyes." © 2004 Legend Pictures

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On July 21st NEFilm spoke with writer/director John Stimpson about his new film, "The Legend of Lucy Keyes," currently in post production. The film is a contemporary thriller that draws on the true story of the disappearance of a young girl from the woods of Wachusett Mountain in 1755, and the stories told by townspeople to this day of the roaming spirits of the lost child and her grief stricken mother. I spoke to Stimpson about the process of bringing the story to the screen, shooting in High Definition, casting Julie Delpy, and working with actors. Stimpson hopes to complete post-production in the early fall and the film has already obtained distribution

commitments in several European territories.

David Tamés: Did you know about the legend at the time you purchased your home in Princeton, Massachusetts?

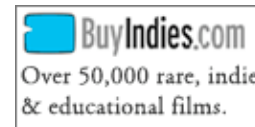
John Stimpson: No, I actually didn't. My wife is involved with the ski area, and through various people in town and the ski area I started hearing about the legend. It so happens that our property goes right up the side of the mountain that was the land Keyes owned. It intrigued me. The public school kids get a tour of the historical Princeton sites. A major stop on the tour is the gravestone of Martha Keyes and the site in which Lucy disappeared. I first learned about [the legend] from Jimmy Dellasantana, a groomer at the Wachusett Mountain ski area. He was on the graveyard shift one night and had some really weird experiences. On the slopes after a fresh snowfall he came upon little kid's footprints. There was nothing else around, no animal tracks, no accompanying adult footprints, just these footprints and it gave him the creeps. He went down the hill and told his supervisor about it who spoke to this other woman who's been around the mountain for a long time and she said, "Oh, it must have been Lucy Keyes."

DT: How did the legend evolve into your screenplay?

Stimpson: I started digging deeper and found out it was the sort of story that lends itself to a film, a true legend in the Webster's dictionary sense of the word: it was verbally passed down from generation to generation, nobody knows the answer, no one really knows what happened to her, her body was never found. We discovered a confession letter from the Keyes' neighbor who confessed to murdering Lucy over a land squabble with her father. There were allusions to it in the history of Princeton, it

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had been pushed aside, but we found the text of the letter at the Cornell University archives. That's when I said, "this is a fascinating story and it's something we should tell." When you have a good idea and someone confirms that it's a good idea, it energizes you to pursue it. I showed an early draft to Mark Donadio and he said, "yes, this is something worth pursuing." Our story takes place today, with the legend as a stepping-stone into the story and something that sets the stage for the rest of it. We've been true to the actual tale

DT: Why did you make the "The Winter People," a short film, prior to "Lucy Keyes"?

Stimpson: We were testing out the Varicam, going all the way to film out with it to see how it projected in 35mm, going through that process. Is it acceptable to an audience? Will they know the difference between High Definition and 35mm? And basically we proved to ourselves that no, they can't tell the difference. We can take a film that's originated in 720P and take it to a big screen in a 35mm blow-up and it stood up side by side with other 35mm originated material seamlessly.

DT: What factors motivated the choice to shoot in HD rather than film?

Stimpson: It certainly has saved us money, but in the scheme of things, it doesn't save you that much. You still have to crew properly and do everything else you end up having to do. You can't really skimp on much, so over the course of the shoot we might have saved five percent or something like that, not a giant savings. I think in doing the "The Winter People" we proved that HD is a simpler and safer alternative to film. You are getting exactly what you're seeing on the monitor and in post you have infinite color correction possibilities. I hear these nightmare stories of film shoots where a whole magazine is fogged and you don't learn about it until two days later when you've wrapped that set. With HD you can't scratch the tape, you don't get a hair in the gate, you don't have these mechanical problems you have with the process of film. The simplicity of the tape-less workflow is what Dave Bigelow [of Moody Street Pictures] pushed me into, and I'm so glad he did, not having to worry about a lot of the old stuff you had to worry about with film.

DT: Any pointers for filmmakers considering shooting their next film in HD?

Stimpson: Every recommendation I got going into the project was to set the camera straight up the middle, don't tweak color, light it straight, keep it clean, so later we could process it and colorize it and treat it with a look. I've talked with Gary Henoch, our D.P., about the image capture and what he would have done differently were it film, and I don't think there was much. We lit it like we wanted it to look, a lot of our movie took place at night, we weren't afraid of the dark, we kept a lot of our scenes very dark. We shot with the Varicam's Film Record mode and it looks fantastic.

DT: Besides the technical stuff, was there anything else you learned directing "The Winter People"?

Stimpson: Well, I've been doing this for 15 years at various levels and various positions, worked as an associate producer, working my way up to producing, writing, and directing, so it wasn't something that I stepped into saying "gosh, I really need the experience directing," it was more about being a genre picture that was a ghost story, to see if we could

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generate suspense and intrigue and on the technical side generate some special effects that help pull us along and make a convincing story, a supernatural story, and that was the goal. And we used that to help sell our bigger project.

DT: What else went into selling the project?

Stimpson: It's important to understand that ultimately, it does not matter what you want, what's important is what's going to play best to the audience. If no one is interested in watching the film that you're making, what good is it? That's part of the reason we feel that we were successful in our fundraising effort. I think we've been successful in producing a film that can be marketed, a film that is going to have broad appeal, that will rise and bubble to the top of the hundreds and hundreds of the indie films made each year.

DT: What, specifically, are you alluding to?

Stimpson: Marketability. The ability to bring a film to market. It's so important, and it's the number one thing that should be considered before anyone embarks on writing a script or thinking about a film is to consider: is it something that, first of all, you can sell to actors, without a good performance you're sunk. And then you need to sell it to investors. We made the conscious decision going into this and in marketing it to first of all consider our investors, and the way we did this was to keep our budget under control, to keep it a small production. And then finally you need to sell it to a distributor or get a distributor behind you earlier along, because if you don't have distribution, you don't have anything.

DT: Speaking of distribution, I've heard you're already selling the film.

Stimpson: We have a sales company, Voltage Pictures out of L.A.. They took the trailer and the poster to Cannes and were able to sell territories on that alone, we now have commitments in eight or 10 different countries to distribute the film theatrically and on television. Germany, for example, wants to do a theatrical release. As we go into the final stages of post, it's nice to know that we have commitments. I'm confident that we're going to get a good deal for North America too, because obviously that's the big one.



Writer/Director John Stimpson and Justin Theroux on the set of "The Legend of Lucy Keyes."
© 2004 Legend Pictures

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DT: How did you know the story was marketable?

Stimpson: We had a genre that has been traditionally accepted and sold and has had appeal more than any other, in that it's a scary movie. Not that scary movies are my passion necessarily, I don't consider it a horror film, it's a supernatural paranormal thriller in the tradition of a Hitchcockian thriller that has a frightening theme.

DT: Speaking of marketable talent, how did you go about casting Julie Delpy?

Stimpson: It's so funny, but it was happenstance. It was a process where we put together lists and lists of actresses we thought would be good. In casting the film we looked at the

demographic, and with Julie Delpy we had an actress who's had some interesting roles in both French and English speaking movies. We were very lucky that she responded to the material, and after a negotiation was willing to come on board. This led us to cast Justin Theroux across from Julie, he's an actor who's an up and comer, I thought that he was fantastic in "Mulholland Drive." Everything rippled from there. The financing came into place, other actors came on board, the whole thing steamrolled into production.

DT: What does it take to cast name actors in a low-budget film?

Stimpson: It really comes down to this: who can you get the script in front of, who's available when you're thinking of going into production, and staying flexible in your availability. If Julie Delpy had said, "yes, but I can't shoot till next spring," we would have waited until next spring. It worked out and I'm glad we shot in the fall. It was the right time to do the film, but you've got to stay flexible. Play all of your cards, put it out there, hope your material is something actors will respond to, it's critical that the actors look at the script and say, "oh, this is a good role" in a story that is going to work. That's how we got Mark Boone, Jr., who was fantastic in our film. He's done so much interesting character work, he's in "Batman Begins," "Memento," and "The Fast and the Furious." He looked at the script and immediately said "yes, I can play that role." I probably did 75 drafts of the script before we even thought about putting it out to talent. I can't stress this enough to filmmakers who are just getting out there. I hear people say, "oh it's draft three, we're locked." I just laugh, because it takes so much work to develop a script to the point it's presentable to anybody, primarily the people that are going to be on screen.

DT: On low-budget productions with tight schedules often the rehearsal process gets short-changed. How did you deal with this challenge on your film?

Stimpson: We got the primary actors here four or five days before we started shooting so that I could spend time with Justin, Julie, and the kids. They are the ones I was most concerned with, but I also spent time with the others. Primarily I broke it down to the critical scenes. I was not going to be able to rehearse everything, we'd approach the sensitive or difficult scenes that the actors needed to do and to put it right out there.

DT: What was it like working with kid actors?

Stimpson: It's very tricky. First of all you have to cast kids who can do the roles and really look carefully at the auditions because so many kids are trained, or taught, by their parents to be big and flashy and stagy, and you just don't want that. You need the ability to be internal, to bring it down, and to be real and to look at the other actor in the eye and interact with them in the moment, in a way that is completely believable, to get them comfortable with the other actors, to have them act and behave and feel as a family like they had been together for years.

DT: How did you accomplish that?

Stimpson: We would not just look at the scenes, we would spend time together, went swimming in the pool, hung out, went to lunch, we were all staying out at the Inn at Wachusett. That allowed everybody to be at the same place. The whole production was like that, we'd have our meals together, after we'd wrap we'd go back to the same place. As we got

deeper into the schedule the bonds grew that much tighter, and by the end the kids and Julie and Justin loved each other, they had a ball. When it was over, they did not want to leave, everyone was crying, it was really sweet. It's getting that ball rolling that's the tricky part and if you only have a few days, it's spending time [and] laying stuff out there that you know is going to be difficult.

DT: What was the most difficult scene in the movie in terms of working with the actors?

Stimpson: We had a very elaborate effect shot where the ghost comes into Lucy's room and it required both Julie Delpy and Cassidy Hinkle (the modern day Lucy) to be terrified, completely vulnerable to this ghost, and at the same time put up with an enormous amount of effect work that was imposing a lot on our time and our patience because it was such an elaborate reset: we had to blow this room up with compressed air and an enormous setup so the countdown to actually doing it and the rehearsal process had to be meticulous. We knew we were only going to be able to do it twice. The pressure of that day on the crew, me, the actors, I think that was probably the toughest day we had. You have to rely on the professionalism of everybody. Julie is such a pro that she could get to emotional places easily. She made my job easier because she was so in touch with her ability to get there. It comes down to good actors make a director look good.

DT: Brings us to the old adage that the basis of great directing is the casting process.

Stimpson: It's a lot of that, and so much of it too is being professional about the use of their time. If you call them to set you'd better be ready; you call them to set, you run a rehearsal, you'll roll it. You're not going to sit there tweaking lights trying different things messing around while they're sitting on set. Respecting actors and what they do is so important.

DT: What remains to be done to complete the film?

Stimpson: I'm leaving for Los Angeles tonight to go sit with Joel Plotch, the editor we've hired out in L.A. to do a polish cut. He's been working on it for the last three or four weeks taking my cut to the next level. As writer, director, editor, it was hard at first to let go, but it's very important to do that. It's really good to bring fresh eyes to a project and tell the story the best way possible. I'm going to sit with him for a week to finish out his time at which point we hope to lock picture and then move into our sound work. The sound design in this movie is very important, because it's all about this spirit who lives in the wind and who you hear in the wind. The texture and the layered feeling of that -- the voice in the wind -- is something in the design that is important. I'm hoping that by the end of September we'll have a cut that we'll be able to show people, and take the next steps at that point.

DT: What role did your family play in the making of the film?

Stimpson: All of them were involved in various ways, Chris, my 12-year-old, was the double for Lucy and did her stunt work. Sam, my nine-year-old, was Lucy's companion in various difficult scary things she needed to do. John, my 14-year-old, is an extra in one of the scenes. My wife Carolyn provided moral support and endless patience, she's been wonderfully supportive and a backbone to the whole process. We shot the film at the mountain, we stayed at the Wachusett Inn, and we could not

have done that without the financial support of the mountain, being able to put up a whole crew and feed them all, if she was willing, she'd be among the executive producers.

For more information on "The Legend of Lucy Keyes" go to <http://www.lucykeyes.com> and for "The Winter People" go to <http://www.thewinterpeople.com>.



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