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Catherine Hardwicke: Female Perspective

by Connor Dalton

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It might only be May, but it's already been a big year for the filmmaker.

The esteemed director of films such as *Twilight*, *Thirteen*, and *Lords of Dogtown* has already had two films released this calendar year.

The first is *Tell It Like a Woman*, an anthology of seven short films which present the courage and resilience of women around the world. Hardwicke is involved in two segments, and for each, she opted to shine a light on a real-life hero. She penned the script to the Jennifer Hudson-led *Pepcy and Kim*, which focuses on Kim Carter, a former addict and prisoner who now helps women in similar circumstances. And functioning as writer and director, Hardwicke constructed a story based on Dr. Susan Partovi, an M.D. renowned for the health care she provides for the homeless and uninsured, in *Elbows Deep*.

The second film is *Mafia Mamma*, which represents a unique new point in Hardwicke's career. Hardwicke has tackled almost every genre imaginable. She has done drama, action, and even a Biblical epic. But *Mafia Mamma* is her first foray into full-blown comedy. The film is about a suburban housewife (played by Toni Collette) embroiled in a mob war when her estranged late grandfather assigns her to take over his mafia empire. And despite contrasting themes and tone, it oddly compliments *Tell It Like a Woman*. Both films highlight Hardwicke's interest in telling stories of female empowerment and her efforts to make sure no two are identical in tone.

We had a lengthy conversation with Hardwicke about how it feels to have her work screened at both the Vatican and the United Nations, the ghosts in her garage, and if she would ever get involved with the recently announced *Twilight* reboot.

How did you get involved with *Tell It Like a Woman*?

Chiara Tilesi — beautiful Italian producer of this project — met a friend of mine, and she just called me. She said, 'I was recommended that you might be great to be part of our team'. And she just had so much passion for this. She really wants to tell women's stories and have women directors. And I'm like, 'Wow, okay, I'm

in' (*laughs*). She said, 'We would give you the chance to write your own project about whatever you want'. I loved the idea of celebrating a real woman who's a real hero, a living hero, and that's how I started the project.



Both of the segments you're involved in centre on real women. Given you had carte blanche to tell whatever story you wanted, what made you decide to shine a light on Kim Carter and Dr. Susan Partovi?

I just thought the idea of doing these women's stories was fun. Let's celebrate real women that are kicking butt right now and could use help with their non-profits, and let's make the world see how cool and awesome they are. I researched both of them, and I read all different articles and met a bunch of different people. I chose both of these women because they were very inspiring and very alive, and not goody-goody — they were wild spirits doing amazing, mind-blowing work.

When you were researching, did you ever meet with Carter or Partovi?

Oh, yes. Kim Carter, I met her first. I drove down to Riverside [in California], and I walked into her office, and I see like twenty women all at their computers learning how to become computer literate and learning how to do résumés. I met all these women, and they had all been in jail six months ago, two months ago, one month ago. They had lost custody of their kids, but there was a nursery there. Some of them already were visiting them. And I saw lives that were literally being transformed right before my very eyes. I was stunned. It was not like donating to a charity [where] you don't know what is going to happen. I saw people right there

being changed and becoming new people. And then I saw that she had a housing facility. They had a place they could stay; she built the building for them. And I'm like, 'What the hell?' And all of this came [from] when she herself was in jail twenty years before and was schizophrenic.

You serve as the writer for the short about Kim Carter, *Pepcy and Kim*. Did you have much collaboration with director Taraji P. Henson and star Jennifer Hudson?

I first went down there and did a few meetings with Kim and wrote it and worked with Kim on it, and then we went to look for the right director. And then Taraji had some notes, so I did some rewrites on it. Then when Jennifer Hudson signed on, she didn't have too many notes. She knew what she was going to do, and, of course, she got to meet with Kim Carter. Kim got to come to the set, so we were all there together. Kim was right there, full of input, but you could see Jennifer just dove right in. She went deep into that character. She was amazing.

What was your response to the finished product? Were there any choices that either Taraji or Jennifer made that surprised you?

I thought it was pretty brave. I thought Jennifer was very raw and very powerful. Maybe I was a little surprised. I was like, 'She's a fucking badass in this!' (*laughs*). She was intense, and I loved it. I thought they did a great job.

Let's change lanes and talk about the short you directed, *Elbows Deep*. Since this isn't the standard way that you would typically sign onto a project, did you have a voice when it came to casting?

Yes. In our case, we shot it during COVID before there was a vaccination. So, a lot of people were nervous to even talk about it and didn't even want to act. But these two women, Cara [Delevingne] and Marcia Gay Harden — and Jasmine [Luv], who plays the nurse — they were like, 'Let's do this, man, let's tell this story'. They were really brave, I thought. But yes, I talked to each of them. We had our Zooms, and I told them about the real person that they were playing, and showed them photos, and they got all excited about it. Then after they signed on, they really dove in. Marcia and Cara got to meet the real Dr. P, and I went down to the homeless encampment right near my house and did tons of interviews with girls that were living on the street and talked with Cara about mannerisms. So, they both really got into it in a beautiful way.



Cara Delevingne's film career has always intrigued. She's portrayed a lot of varying archetypes — she's been the action heroine, the girl next door, the supervillain. It's almost like Hollywood knows that she belongs on the screen but is unsure where best to place her at times. Having directed her, we're curious, what do you think is her best asset as a performer?

She's very quirky and fun and raw and natural and enthusiastic and funny. I think she loves to just dive into the role, and I would love to work with her

again because I find her to be special and almost from another planet (*laughs*). She's just so unique and beautiful, and she's a drummer, and she's creative. She came over [to my house], and we made all the clothes that her character was going to wear. She was writing on them and drawing on them and cutting them — she's just a creative human being. I'm writing a script in my mind that I'm going to try to finish and get her to do. I think she's super talented and could play many, many different roles.

We saw that *Tell It Like a Woman* recently screened at the United Nations. That must have been a first for you. How was that experience?

Oh my god, I couldn't believe it. I mean, I did a movie with Keisha Castle-Hughes and Oscar Isaac — that was *The Nativity Story* — and that screened in the Vatican. And then this one screened in the freaking United Nations General Assembly with delegates from fifty countries. All these women were really inspiring. All the ambassadors [were] standing up and telling us about the female gaze and male gaze in film. These diplomats

were very sophisticated, talking about what images are put out there for women that make a direct difference in this country. They were really excited to see something that celebrates [women] in a positive way. It was a very impressive, overwhelming evening, to say the least.

This isn't your first film to release this year, with *Mafia Mamma* hitting cinemas a few weeks ago.

What drew you to that material?

Well, you've got a great Australian actress named Toni Collette that I worked with on one other movie. We did *Miss You Already* together with Drew Barrymore, and we had a blast. And I felt like during the pandemic, we've all been in a lot of serious and dark situations, and when [Toni] sent this script to me for *Mafia Mamma*, I just laughed out loud many times when I read it because it was very crazy and zany. I like all different genres, and I love wild Quentin Tarantino things and *Bridesmaids* and *The Hangover*, so I was thinking, *This is some kind of crazy combination of all this*. Plus, I love Italy; who doesn't?

And the idea that it was a mashup of Toni's character imagining that she was going to go and have a rom-com in Italy, meet some hot Italian guy, and then it turns out she's getting shot at and poisoned by the mafia like this crazy fish out of water, I thought, *Okay, that just sounds fun, and we all need a laugh, too (laughs)*. It was an absolutely beautiful experience because we had an all-Italian crew. We shot all in Rome [with] all-Italian actors except for Toni. And the fact that it's also supporting women — women that are finding each other, their friendships, and themselves through this journey, but in a very funny way.

MAFIA MAMMA | Official Trailer | Paramount Picture...



We were surprised by how unafraid the film was to get gory. We don't think we can even describe some of the things that happened. What made you elect to push the envelope and go so hard?

Well, it was in the script, but also, I thought the crotch eye sequence might be kind of a cathartic experience. You know, the guy was trying to assault her, trying to kill her, so she had to build up that rage while she's listening to her bosses on Zoom. And I thought, *Well, let's just go*. Plus, I love Quentin Tarantino movies, I love *Evil Dead* too, so I'm like, 'Let's just have fun with it'. Obviously, it's over-the-top outrageous (*laughs*).

We know that character is an evil man, but we can't say we weren't squirming in the cinema during that sequence!

(*laughs*) Well, that guy was so funny. He's a Bond villain in the one in Mexico City [*Spectre*]; he's at the beginning of that film. He didn't speak that much English, and I said, 'Look, I'm going to make you this, you're going to wear a shield over your real parts, and then I'm going to make a fake set of parts for you so it can get stabbed'. And he's like, 'Okay' (*laughs*). He was hilarious.

There's an interesting throughline in your filmography of stories centred on women finding a sense of empowerment. What is it about those sorts of character journeys that fascinate you as a storyteller?

It's something that a lot of people are going through now — myself included — where you're trying to discover your voice and how much can you say and how much can you stand up for yourself and not be considered too difficult or outrageous. In some ways, that's why I wanted to go ahead and have fun with the gore like *Cocaine Bear* did or lots of male filmmakers do, and people are able to laugh about it. We can do that too as women.

Another thing that has struck us about your body of work is your versatility. You have worked in so many different genres over your career. Is that done by design, or has it just been that the higher powers see you as a good fit for almost anything?

Well, as a director, we don't really get to choose very much. In other words, we can say no to certain things, but some of our beloved projects that we care so much about, we can't always get the money for. You can't get the stars to align, so I have in the garage [what] I call 'the ghosts in the garage' (*laughs*). They are all the projects I loved so dearly that I did all the storyboards, the scripts, and location scouts for. I even did short films and acted out scenes, but I just couldn't get the rock up the hill. So sometimes you've been doing that

on three projects in a row, then somebody comes with something from outer space like *The Nativity Story* and says, ‘Hey, in nine months, this has to be in the theatre. Do you want to do it or not?’ I’m like, *Wow, what did I do for the last nine months? Talked on the phone begging for things.* And I said, ‘I’ll get to go to Italy and Morocco and Jerusalem and work with actors from thirty different countries and learn all about stuff. I get to kind of discover Oscar Isaac and ride on camels’. I’m like, ‘I guess I’m going to go’ (*laughs*).



CATHERINE HARDWICKE, KRISTEN STEWART AND STEPHENIE MEYER ON THE SET OF *TWILIGHT*

We’d be regretful if we didn’t talk to you about *Twilight*. Recently there was the announcement that it will be rebooted as a television series, with each book constituting one season. How do you feel about that?

I mean, they said it’s in early development, and we know some of these projects can be in development for ten years, but I hope it gets made because we know that people love the story and love to see other actors play it and take it in a different direction, so I think it’s exciting. I love all the funny spinoffs and jokes and

memes and everything that people make. It's inspired so many people to be creative. That's really cool, and one thing that's touched me a lot over the years with *Twilight* is I've had so many people come up to me and tell me [what it means to them]. One girl couldn't read, she was dyslexic, and after she saw the movie, she learned to read so she could read the book. Another woman didn't have any friends, but then she connected with somebody in England and somebody in the Middle East, and now she has friends because they bonded. I've seen how it's really brought people together, and I think that's beautiful. I'm sure the TV show would do the same thing.

Given you only directed the first film, if the team behind the series came to you to gauge your interest in potentially directing the *New Moon* or *Eclipse* season, is that something you'd be interested in?

That would be a good challenge. I would never say never. I'd like to put it in outer space, maybe just twist it up a little bit more, but I'd love to see what their take is on it. Stephenie [Meyer], the creator, mother, and godmother of the whole series, I don't know what she wants to do with it, but she's pretty cool and creative. So, who knows? You never know! *(laughs)*

Tell It Like a Woman *is available now on all digital platforms and DVD*

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