



Chemical Cut (2016) | Interview with Writer/Director/Actor Marjorie Conrad by Chris Lambert

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Arthur is one of the most terrifying characters I've ever watched. Can you tell me about developing that character during the script process? And then about casting Ian Coster. And then filming with Ian (I really like this idea of your writing a character as maniacal as Arthur while knowing you're going to have to act against him, stand before him, face his intensity and the sheer force of his personality. It seems, in a way, like a Frankenstein kind of story, just far less destructive and involving less lightning).

I'm so happy you feel that way about Arthur! Ian and I do think of him as an emotional terrorist. While writing, I knew I wanted his character to be polarizing for the audience. He's the voice of harsh reason (he isn't necessarily wrong when he attacks Irene's choices, which forces the viewer to partially identify with his abusive behavior). He's entertaining while he does it, too, so you see why Irene might believe he's the most interesting person she knows. On a more relatable note, Arthur is in a stressful situation himself, trying to define his own place in the world. He takes out his frustration on someone very close to him, a coping mechanism we're all guilty of indulging in to some degree. Irene's too busy seeking Arthur's approval to realize how ridiculous he's being.

The casting process was easy. Ian Coster is a born actor with an unpredictable comedic style and one of the most unique people I have ever met. He read the script, watched my short film Limehouse during his lunch break, and signed on right afterward. He was the first person I cast. The film shoot itself went very smoothly because of Ian's innate fearlessness. Generally speaking, I wanted to cast actors with great energy and improvisational talent but very different comedic flavors. I thought this could fabricate an unusual rhythm, an atmosphere of bullying, silliness, and chaos that would contrast with and threaten Irene's facially expressive, quiet, and inarticulate character.

Poor Irene. During the narrative construction, did you find yourself being too nice to Irene and having to find more ways to pull her down, or did you find yourself being overly mean and lowering the intensity of how poorly the world treats her?

Probably overly sadistic and trying to take down the intensity a notch. Characters don't have safe words.

As a writer, what was the biggest thing you learned from Chemical Cut? As a director? As an actor?

As a writer: narrative often feels right because it's familiar, but narrative isn't always cinematic. Knowing how to listen to your own thoughts is most important; it's how the work can start, and it takes a long time.

As a director: to try and think of cinema as a visual/auditory force, nothing else. My dream film is one that both devours the viewer and elicits great joy.

As an actor: attempt to sensitize yourself as much as possible to the presence in front of you (e.g., a fellow actor or the world of the scene). That concrete physical presence is all you need.

The modeling world is something you've experienced (survived?!). Chemical Cut shows how cutthroat and dehumanizing and confusing the industry can be. Do you want to explore the flip side of that? Or do you see your next project looking at an altogether different subject matter?

An altogether different subject matter. I co-wrote the script for my second feature with my mother, graphic novel scenarist Sophie Commenge, and we're currently in the early revision process. It's a dark family drama with an absurdist streak, where the matriarch convinces the rest of the family that the youngest daughter is to blame for all of their problems. The father and older siblings each go along with it for complex individual reasons. We follow the youngest daughter as she refuses to be their sacrificial lamb and finds a means of escape.

What aspect of the project gave you the greatest sense of triumph? Was it finally getting the narrative construction into place? Or maybe once casting was finished? Or calling cut on the

final scene? Or acceptance to Slamdance(!!!)? Or maybe something as simple as one moment on set where you're off to the side, watching everyone else, and there's that sense of, "This is happening. it's really happening. How amazing."?

Production was exhilarating and exhausting, starting with the first shoot day. I got beaten by the ocean waves over and over in the last takes of the beach scene; then, we immediately made a company move to the Aero theater and shot quite a long catfight. Ian and I were screaming in the streets well past midnight. The pace was relentless for 27 days, but we all trusted each other. I was tremendously lucky to collaborate with such a devoted, imaginative, and generous team.

Being invited to premiere at Slamdance came as such a surprise! I had no expectations. I consider filmmaking a lifelong commitment, and I only aim to learn as much as possible. It's thrilling that the film's life is continuing; I get to share it with an audience and understand this experience in a really holistic way.

If you could have one person watch your movie, someone living or dead, who would it be and why?

Patricia Highsmith, even if she wasn't a cinephile. I never want to leave Highsmith Country; it's fascinating and completely addictive. I wish we could see more morally ambiguous film characters betrayed by their ordinary dreams.

If you could direct a movie starring one musician, would it be Kanye West, Zaz, Lou Bega, Olivia Newton-John, or one of the Spice Girls? And what genre of movie would it be? Biopic, sci-fi, thriller, etc.

Starring one: Sporty Spice, social justice.

Starring two: Kanye and Olivia in a dysfunctional mother/son dramedy.