

# Season 4 Q&A-Interviews

Episode: 405- The Lindquist Concern (#105)

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## INTERVIEW WITH KURT KUENNE

### GENERAL INTRO/WARMUP

**How did you go from award winning filmmaker and composer to directing this episode on the Blacklist?**

Jon Bokenkamp has been one of my best friends for 23 years now; we met at USC, worked on each other's movies, we were roommates for 2 1/2 years after graduation, constantly gave notes on each other's scripts and films, I scored his first feature as a director in the late 90s -- and we actually discussed the possibility of my becoming the composer for "The Blacklist" when the pilot was going into production in 2013, but scoring a TV show is a 24/7 life that I didn't want (unlike scoring a feature, which is a finite process, after which you can return to your own projects). I believe I was one of the first people ever to read the pilot script and give notes on it, I gave notes on the edit of the pilot and many other episodes, and it's been fun to watch the progress of this show from the sidelines and be an impartial sounding board Jon can come to for occasional feedback. As I tend to focus on telling my own stories, directing pieces written by others isn't something I tend to pursue -- so I was kind of surprised when Jon called me last December and asked if I'd be interested in directing an episode of the show. I hesitated at first because when you go to work for your friends, you have the potential to jeopardize that relationship -- and I like being the guy he can complain to, I didn't want to be the guy he was complaining *about* -- but he's been a fan of my movies for years, had every confidence it would work out, it was an honor to be asked, and I'm always up for a new challenge, so I decided to jump in and give it everything I had.

### EPISODE 405

**Coming in as a new - first time director on the blacklist - what kind of prep work do you do? Like do you watch all three seasons to catch up? How do you get on top of things?**

Because I've been a sort of unofficial sideline consultant/cheerleader on the show since its inception, I didn't really need to go back and re-watch anything for familiarity's sake, because I'd seen every episode, and often multiple cuts of certain episodes, so I knew the show's mythology

and characters through and through. Because I'd never done television before, what I did do was go out to the set and "shadow" for a week back in April, which means I followed a couple of different "Blacklist" directors around on their episodes, watching the process to see how this company functions and gets the work done, as their workflow is a bit different from what I do on my indie films. I shadowed Michael Watkins and Andrew McCarthy, both of whom were wonderful and gracious. So I was there for the last couple of days of shooting of "Cape May", and the first couple of days of shooting of "Susan Hargrave", and it was interesting to see how "The Blacklist" uses three cameras simultaneously in order to pound through all of that material so quickly, as 9 days is not much time to shoot what is essentially half of a feature film. I got to meet a lot of the crew and develop relationships with them, which made things more comfortable for when I returned to direct in August of this year. After that, I did go back and re-watch all of the episodes that both Michael and Andrew had directed, which was really interesting having just watched their process in person. I also went back and reviewed certain key episodes, and it was interesting to see in context how the style has evolved and changed since the pilot, which is something your mind tends to remember differently over time.

### **What was it like working with James Spader and the cast?**

The whole cast was a joy. James Spader was wonderful to work with, such a gentleman. He's such a captivating actor that I would sometimes get caught up watching him and forget to call cut. I also love that James really wants to take time to figure everything out down to the last detail, he cares so deeply about getting it right -- and when you're on a fast paced TV schedule, there aren't a lot of opportunities to get to luxuriate in the creativity of it all, but blocking and rehearsing scenes with him was a rare opportunity to do that, which I truly cherished. Coming into this experience, I wasn't sure how one directs actors who've already been playing their parts for three years, as they clearly know their characters far better than me -- though having been so intimately familiar with the show was a big help, because I could discuss details about their character from past seasons and how that might affect a moment that's playing now, for example -- but what I quickly discovered is that you're mostly just giving small adjustments. You're there to give them a framework in which to do their work and to make sure that the intention of the scene is coming across and playing authentically. It's easy to get caught up in the minutia of a moment when you're shooting, so it's my job to keep the big picture in mind and catch them if they begin losing the emotion, flow or intention of a scene, if that makes sense. Or, in a lot of cases, they're just cooking on their own and the wisest thing I could do was shut up, let 'em rip and make sure the cameras were in the right place to catch what they were doing. (And a huge shout-out here goes to Mike Caracciolo, the cinematographer, who makes it possible to capture them so beautifully on such a fast schedule.)

### **We saw your tweet last night about the actor portraying Silas - Adam Godley - You said he crushed it.**

Silas is a character who invents a separate persona to go out and do his dastardly deeds -- so we needed an actor who could feel like two different people: he's a sad sack when he's a

worker bee and he's a powerful attorney when he's out on the prowl. And we were so fortunate that Adam Godley said yes, because if you look at his immense body of work, every role he plays feels like a completely different person. And he has such a facility with accents - he's British, believe it or not - that he can inhabit almost any voice he chooses; he's such a chameleon. We had lunch before the shoot and talked through his whole character, where he auditioned the different voices he planned to do for me, i.e. the slick lawyer voice and the angry, worker bee voice in which he gives his monologue toward the end, and it was an amazing thing to behold. One of my favorite moments of his is when he's at home preparing the champagne bottle, gets Riley's phone call and we see his sad-sack body language remain while the slick lawyer voice comes out of his mouth during the phone call. It's such an eerie juxtaposition. Working with Adam on this show was the closest relationship I had to the actors I've directed on my own indie features, because we really had a chance to shape the character from the ground up.

**It takes a lot of people to pull off a show - what was your experience like working with the different teams on this episode?**

The crew on this show is top notch across the board. Michael Watkins and Laura Benson, who run the production unit in New York, are 100% devoted to the show, magnificent at what they do, were such an immense support to me -- and the fact that they do this 10 months a year while juggling multiple episodes is so impressive to me; I found one episode to be exhausting enough, but they're dealing with the problems of about three episodes simultaneously and making sure everything that needs to happen is happening. They were amazing. Adam Weisinger, the 1st AD (assistant director), was my constant companion throughout this experience, was a marvelous support, kept me on schedule and runs the set like a boss; Casey Madigan and Pete Donohue, who make up the rest of the AD team, were also sharp as hell and on top of every detail. Mike Caracciolo, the cinematographer, is just a brilliant, brilliant man and wonderful to work with; lighting for multiple camera directions is the hardest thing a cinematographer can be charged with doing, and he manages to do it day in and day out while making it look beautiful, and giving you the space you need to let the actors be free to move -- not to mention the speed at which he's required to do that job. The camera operators are fantastic too - Derek Walker, Devin Ladd, Peter Agliata, Kyle Rudolph, Chris Hayes - they really help you out by finding pieces and moments, executing moves beautifully. Nicholas Lundy, the production designer, is a supremely talented man who manages to design and erect sets at high speed that feel so authentic that I'd sometimes forget I wasn't in a real apartment, storage facility or what have you -- and his team works so hard to get all of that ready to go in the short time that we have, they do such terrific work. Devin Maggio led the team responsible for blowing up the car in the warehouse, and I just thought they outdid themselves, it was probably the most spectacular thing I've ever seen in person. Bonnie Finnegan brought in wonderful actors for me to choose from, Christine Bean's instincts, taste and style in costuming are superb...I could go on. But these people do extremely high quality work at very high speed; it was a privilege to be able to ask them for what I wanted, then watch how beautifully they executed it. And while not technically on the "crew", none of us would have anything to shoot if

it weren't for Dawn DeNoon, the writer of this episode, who I thought created a fantastic Blacklister and beautifully constructed the story. And I love the humorous touches she put in, like Red and Dembe's exchange about the freckle, or Samar catching Aram doing a video call with his girlfriend at work.

### **What is your favorite scene in this episode and why?**

My favorite scene? I really like the post-car-explosion phone call that James Spader and Megan Boone have while the remains of the car are burning in the background. It's a nice, quiet moment of understanding between the two of them, and Red's recognition that she saved his life is, for me, very emotional to watch. I also love Aram's date with Elise, which cross cuts with Ressler and Samar discussing it at the office; it was such fun to get to film that scene, which was essentially an improv by Amir Arison and Annie Heise, I just gave them a framework for what foods they would work their way through and let them go...and I think it's lovely to get to see that side of Aram's character on the show.

### **Any funny stories that happened during the making of the episode? - Funny things that happened?**

When we were filming the scene where Tom confronts Vasily (the Russian D.C. station chief that he blackmails for the SVR file on Alexander Kirk, played by David Agranov) at an outdoor dining area, it was insanely windy; we started trying to play the scene but the wind kept blowing Ryan Eggold's hair in his face, adding unintended humor, which is why he's wearing a baseball cap in that scene. It also made it challenging for him when he was threatening Vasily with this file full of doctored evidence because Ryan had to keep his hand on it or the whole thing would blow away. I joked with him that the version of the scene I'd like to do would be one where he sits down, makes this big threat about the contents of the file, then the wind blows the entire file away into the ocean...and then he just deadpans, "Never mind," and gets up and walks away. Make it play like an Inspector Clouseau scene. That would have been good comedy. But of course, we had to shoot the script. :)

### **What is the significance of Ressler running into gnomes? The fans are wondering if you might have some insight into that?**

Ha! Well, Ressler famously attacked the gnome at Cooper's house some time ago -- and when we were in the midst of shooting that sequence where Ressler and Navabi are descending upon Riley's house, someone from the art department pulled the gnome out of one of the trucks as a joke...and I saw it, talked to Diego about his memories of the last gnome scene and decided to throw it in the frame as a little in-joke when he comes out from behind the fence. I mainly did it to make Jon Bokenkamp laugh during dailies, I wasn't sure if it would make the final cut through all of the network/studio notes...but it did! That's one of those little moments that puts my experience watching the show so closely for all these years to good use. :) I honestly just thought it was a funny call-back. There's nothing like a good running gag.