

Fataculture

Film and Television Appreciation Culture.

December 17, 2008

Review: "Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father"

Posted in [Film Reviews](#) tagged [Dear Zachary: A letter to a Son About His Father](#) at 11:17 am by Nick Plowman



Saying that "Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father" is one of the most overwhelming true tales of the extraordinarily powerful nature of friendship, love and loss and one of the most genuinely breathtaking films that one could ever hope to have the pleasure of watching is doing the film is great disservice. In fact, reviewing such personal films always seems rather pointless because there are certain occurrences and the emotions that come along with them that, when interwoven as nature intended, can't possibly be conveyed using words. They have to be seen and felt, and even the feelings that result are hard to express coherently.

There is also very little pleasure in watching Kurt Kuenne's all-encompassing testament of boundary-escaping loyalty and indictment of the flawed criminal judicial system. There are tragedies at the heart of the humanistic, unembellished tribute and to say that one felt moved by Kuenne's film causes something of a confliction of spirit. Having "Dear Zachary" not having to exist at all would surely be the ideal human reaction to such atrocities that resulted in its production, but thinking of a world in which I had never seen "Dear Zachary" is tough too, not equally tough, but tough enough.

In fact, "Dear Zachary" was never intended for our eyes until it was and a twist or two of fate caused its

direction to swerve from a personal love letter into something more profound in the fact that it draws in complete strangers and despite being so painfully personal, we almost feel apart of the story. In truth, it doesn't "almost" make us feel inherently involved, we simply do – hard to explain, hard to make sense of, and very hard to stomach without becoming a messy bundle of gut-wrenching emotions.

For as private and special as it may be, such feelings of loss and hopelessness against all odds are universal, and the undeniable bonds of familial connections are something we can all relate to – and when those bonds are broken unjustly and without cause, it is impossible to not feel shattered.

But questions like those – what if? – are easy enough to dwell on, far easier than "what now?" On the 5th of November in 2001, Mr. Kuenne's lifelong best friend, Dr. Andrew Bagby, was shot in cold blood five times in a Pennsylvanian parking lot by a psychotic ex-girlfriend, Dr. Shirley Turner. For reasons unknown, Shirely was allowed to post bail and she fled to her home in Canada – and it was in the safety of her maddeningly irresponsible homeland where she announced that she was pregnant, with the man whom she killed without remorse's child. She would name him Zachary.

Fatherless and being a son of a deranged murderer, Mr. Kuenne came up with an idea to ensure that no matter what, Zachary would forever have something of his father to hold onto – a visualisation of a life cut horribly short. Kurt would travel to Europe and across the United States in search of all the people Andrew had touched in his life, of which there are many and their mixture of sadness and love for Andrew radiates from each and every frame.

He would weave together a seemingly endless array of touching, humorous and some downright heartbreaking interviews and aged home movies to give a son a celebratory sense of a father whom Zach would never truly know, but "Dear Zachary" would be the next best thing. Having filmed his docu-scrapbook right in the heat as the jaw-dropping story played out, there is a sense of urgency to Kurt's story, from his narration to the brisk, uncluttered manner in which it all unfolds despite it being strongly impassioned.

In a world made up of billions of human faces, the majority of which fall prey to personal hardships on the daily, it becomes a disheartening reality that the magnitude of ones life can be so easily taken for granted until it is lost. All the mourning in the world can never bring back someone we've lost, but celebrating and remembering them for who they were is what counts most. "Dear Zachary" does just that, and in turn reminds us all that we are all on this Earth for a reason and we all have a place that is filled by our very presence within the human race – a place that can never be filled by anyone other than ourselves, and a place that can never be emptied either.

Nevertheless, some, like Andrew, the Bagbys and Kurt, overflow their allotted space in society and are able to touch the lives of absolute strangers out of their selfless existences. It forces us to question our own standing in the world we so often take for granted, and considering that was never on the agenda to begin with, that is possibly the most profound gift Kurt's stunning, passionate ode offers to us as viewers.

Nothing about "Dear Zachary" is commonplace, although the footage used may seem ordinary – home movies like we seen here aren't exactly rare, but when filtered through the eyes of those who have experienced a tragedy, its possibilities to touch, to change and to heal are endless. That, to me, is the mark of not only a great director and a great documentary but an honest to God exemplification of what it means to be alive.

Fatac Rating: ****½

Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father. Directed by Kurt Kuenne. Featuring: Kurt Kuenne, Zachary Andrew, David Bagby, Dr. Andrew Bagby, and Kathleen Bagby. Running Time: 95 minutes. Rating: 4.5 out of 5 stars. [A]

Share this: [StumbleUpon](#) [Digg](#)

[Permalink](#)

Like Be the first to like this post.

13 Comments »



Jerry said,

December 17, 2008 at [1:17 pm](#)

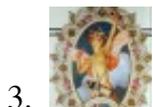
Indeed, this is one of the most moving documentaries I have ever seen in my entire life, and a film I shall never forget – that is for certain. Fantastic review, honestly.



Salmaya said,

December 17, 2008 at [1:27 pm](#)

I actually think I was far more affected by this film than Man on Wire, and Dear Zachary is now my favourite documentary of 2008 – and very high up in terms of how it ranks with the other feature films. It was such an unexpected doc, and it has moved almost everyone who has seen it. That is amazing.



[Vera](#) said,

December 17, 2008 at [5:52 pm](#)

Just reading about that Turner/Bagby case, especially the ultimate outcome, makes my heart ache. I'm OK with fiction, but real life is a lot harder. As good as this film seems to be, I don't know if I'd be able to watch it.



4.

[Nick Plowman](#) said,

December 17, 2008 at [6:15 pm](#)

It is not an easy film to watch at all, but it is incredibly moving and well worth it in the end, so I really think that you should watch it regardless.



5.

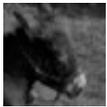
[Matthew Lucas](#) said,

December 17, 2008 at [7:55 pm](#)

Always glad to see some love for this one. I definitely think it moved me more than "Man on Wire," but for very different reasons. I sat on my couch and bawled my little heart out.

"Man on Wire" is moving out of sheer awe and wonder, this one is a profoundly human tragedy, but with an undeniably bittersweet note of hope.

Wonderful.



6.

[Sam Juliano](#) said,

December 17, 2008 at [8:00 pm](#)

Now, it is your turn Nick, to contribute to the literature of this greatest documentary of 2008. (Yes I have it higher than MAN ON WIRE). It's unbearably emotional, and it holds you days and weeks after you see it. Again, a most perceptive and thoughtful account here, both in relating the unspeakable story and it conveying the film's value and essence.



7.

[Nick Plowman](#) said,

December 18, 2008 at [6:51 am](#)

Well, I will finally see Man on Wire today, but I won't let any of the hype affect my judgement of it, that's for sure. Still, I can't believe I have had to wait this long...



8.

Sam Juliano said,

December 18, 2008 at [4:45 pm](#)

So what did you think of MAN ON WIRE, Nick?



9.

[Nick Plowman](#) said,

December 18, 2008 at [5:03 pm](#)

I actually haven't watched it yet – I watched Gran Torino instead, which I thought was entertaining but nothing amazing – I'd give that one 3.5 out of 5 stars I think, but who knows what will happen whenever I pen my review. I will watch Man on Wire shortly.



10.

[Nick Plowman](#) said,

December 18, 2008 at [7:44 pm](#)

So now I have seen Man on Wire and can finally concur with the notion that it is the finest documentary of the year. However, Dear Zachary is the most profoundly moving and emotional, and American Teen is the one I will most likely be watching again anytime soon.



11.

[Allison](#) said,

December 18, 2008 at [10:11 pm](#)

Great film, yes. :)

BTW I'm interested to hear why you weren't so crazy about Roman de Gare. It's my 2nd favorite film of the year.



12.

[Nick Plowman](#) said,

December 18, 2008 at [10:19 pm](#)

I honestly never gave Roman de Gare much thought, and that rating was totally based on impulse, I am sure it would go a little higher perhaps if I had ever written a review of it. I liked it, but it didnt grab me :(



13.

[k](#) said,

December 20, 2008 at [11:14 pm](#)

This film made me cry like a little baby, and then, the first person I saw, I went on a rant about the way the government fucked up so royally with that woman.

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published.

Name

Email

Website

Comment

You may use these HTML tags and attributes: `` `<abbr title="">` `<acronym title="">` `` `<blockquote cite="">` `<cite>` `<code>` `<pre>` `<del datetime="">` `` `<i>` `<q cite="">` `<strike>` ``