

BOXOFFICE MAGAZINE

Murder and malediction

Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father

ON **DECEMBER 18, 2009** BY **CATHLEEN ROUNTREE**



I'll just say it up front: *Dear Zachary* will break your heart—but don't even consider missing it. After Andrew Bagby, a 28-year-old doctor, was murdered by his estranged girlfriend (40-year-old Shirley Turner, who then fled to Canada), Kurt Kuenne resolved to create a monument in moving images—a cinematic letter to Zachary, the son Bagby didn't live long enough to meet (nor, in fact, even know he had conceived). The story, which was widely publicized in *Dance with the Devil: A Memoir of Murder and Loss*, a bestseller by David Bagby, Andrew's father, seared across the screen and

planted itself indelibly in this reviewer's memory. A favorite at this year's Slamdance and other festivals, *Dear Zachary* should prove a theatrical breakout.

The day after Kuenne received the news of his lifelong best friend Andrew's death, he realized he should wait several months in order to temper the sheer, raw emotion felt by family and friends. He spent that time poring through miles of home movie footage from his and Andrew's childhood. Kuenne knew when he was 7 years old that he wanted to be a filmmaker. And portions of these early dramatic and comic skits blend seamlessly and eerily into the unfolding tragedies that took place decades later. It was as if Kuenne had started making *Dear Zachary* some 20 years previously.

As one might expect in such a film, Andrew (who, in looks and demeanor, resembled a beneficent Jack Black) is presented as a fun-loving, passionate, altruistic young man, and an adoring and adored son and friend. In a poignant and well-placed clip from long ago, he presages his desire to become a doctor by announcing that he will "go back in time and stop people dying." Kuenne (who wrote, directed, edited and produced the film) traveled across the continent, meeting, interviewing and filming Andrew's numerous friends. But the soul of the film belongs to Andrew's parents Kate and David, whose profound dedication to the memory of their only child and pursuit to gain custody of Zachary is at times almost too painful to watch.

In addition to serving as a tribute to his friend, *Dear Zachary* further functions as an indictment of an impaired Canadian legal system. Though Turner had been charged with first-degree murder, she was released (without bail) while she awaited extradition to the U.S. The judge in the case, Gale Welsh, seemingly ignored evidence (which placed Turner at the scene of the crime and gave her motive) by fallaciously reasoning that because the accused had already murdered Andrew she proved no threat to others. Kuenne hopes to eventually show the film on Canadian television as well as in the Parliament.

Watching the unfolding twin monster tragedies and the long-suffering parents/grandparents of Andrew and his son, viewers can't help but ache with empathy for them and decry the slow-acting Canadian judicial system, which freed a murderer, thus enabling her to carry out the unthinkable. *Dear Zachary* gets as close as cinematically possible to stepping into "the skin" of other suffering human beings. It's a testament to the filmmaker that, through this wrenching screening experience, we never lose sight of the dignity, love and hope that Kate and David Bagby embody. This film is as much an honoring of them as it is of their son Andrew--and rightly so.

Distributor: Oscilloscope Pictures

Cast: David Bagby, Kathleen Bagby, Andrew Bagby, Zachary Andrew, Heather Arnold, Shirley Turner and Kurt Kuenne

Director/Screenwriter/Producer: Kurt Kuenne

Genre: Documentary

Rating: Unrated

Running time: 95 min.

Release date: October 31 NY, November 7 LA