

WAITING FOR HOCKNEY- ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Origins

Julie Checkoway has been a high school teacher, a published writer, a tenured professor, and a mother; but directing and producing the feature-length documentary WAITING FOR HOCKNEY would turn out to be one of the greatest risks of her personal and professional life.

In the summer of 2002, Checkoway was living in Houston producing work for public radio's 'This American Life' and NPR's 'Morning Edition.' To that end, she traveled to Baltimore - a city where she had lived for eight years and from which her husband hails - to interview Dr. Gary Vikan, director of The Walters Art Museum. On that afternoon the conversation quickly turned to the topic of Billy Pappas, a young artist in whose story Vikan felt certain Checkoway would have an interest. "Here's this young guy who's embarked on a really risky endeavor," said Vikan "and the story of the endeavor was as interesting as the product itself," referring to the single pencil drawing on which Billy Pappas had spent nearly a decade.

Vikan regaled Checkoway with stories about Pappas, about the strength and fragility of Pappas' work - on a sheet of watercolor paper---and about the amazing cast of characters with whom Pappas had surrounded himself, including an eccentric local architect named Larry Link, and a clergyman name Brother Rene, who had been Pappas's high school principal. Checkoway arranged to interview Pappas and found him charming, articulate, and attractive, both sophisticated and rough-hewn, as given to the use of high academic language as he was to cursing like a sailor. That dichotomy intrigued Checkoway, who had grown up, as Pappas had, in a working class family but who had gone to Harvard, after which she had always felt a similar class division in herself.

Pappas had taken his desire for reconstruction, like a contemporary Gatsby, to the most extreme level. What was it that had made Pappas take on such an ambitious project? What did he hope to gain from it? What would happen if the project, finished at last, yielded a very different result than the one for which he was aiming - no less than inventing an entirely new art movement?

A Film, Not A Radio Piece

After taking several trips to Baltimore and compiling 30 hours of audio, it began to occur to Checkoway that she had something unwieldy and wild, and given its ultimately visual nature, probably not for radio. Checkoway was five months pregnant with her second daughter when she traveled to Mexico to visit her older brother Neal, who had founded popular web site Travelocity.

"When Julie told me about Billy Pappas," Neal Checkoway says, "I was intrigued on several levels. That he was trying to lift himself above the perceived restraints of his working class roots by dint of his own skill and hard work resonated strongly with me. I found it particularly interesting and analogous to my own unlikely success story, the notion that someone with no particular qualifications might have the audacity to believe he could crack a rarified and elite world." Neal told his sister that the story she was documenting was not a radio piece, and challenged her to make it into a film.

After conversations with several film industry folks with whom friends put her in touch, Julie Checkoway began to realize that, despite the fact that she knew nothing about how to make a film and that she was about to have a baby, she would go for it with the support of her husband and family.

Shooting Begins

In the spring of 2004, Checkoway called on friends Steve Lickteig and Rob Hilton, both public radio veterans, to help with sound and story, and she hired local Baltimore and Emmy award-winning cinematographer Richard Chisolm to shoot video. She and the crew met in Baltimore for the first time to interview the main characters and to see, at last, the finished portrait.

The first shoot took place in Choptank, Maryland, some miles from Baltimore, at the run-down house in which Pappas had been living for most of the time he had been at work on his project. The setting was picturesque; the house stood literally just feet from the Choptank River and a wharf where small fishing boats docked.

Since Lickteig, Hilton nor Checkoway had no filmmaking experience, they counted on their instincts about storytelling to carry them through. Hilton did the sound recording, carrying around a heavy DAT on his waist and sweating in the Maryland heat as he held up the boom mike all day. Both he and Lickteig were key players: they knew a good story when they saw one, and though their training was in sound, they encouraged Checkoway to let the story unfold itself visually in front of them. Checkoway had been to Choptank before, and Hilton and Lickteig stood off camera and asked the kinds of questions of Pappas that were fresh to them.

Billy lit up for the camera. He walked them through his process, through the decrepit house in which he lived, and demonstrated the method he used to apply lipstick to his own lips in order to have a constant model for his “life study drawing.” Ultimately, Pappas gave a compelling sit-down interview in which he bared his soul about the sacrifices he had made during the years he had undertaken the portrait. The crew’s ride back to Baltimore that night was anything but silent. The debate was heated. Was Billy Pappas deluded? Were his hopes for his project within the realm of reason? The car was divided, and as Checkoway listened to the others battle it out, she realized that this was precisely that kind of debate she hoped the film itself, once finished, would someday provoke.

Second Day of Shooting And The Portrait Revealed

The second day of the shoot began at Billy’s parents’ house in Baltimore, where Checkoway interviewed Billy’s mother, Cookie, as she baked her famous poppy seed cake. Later that evening, the crew would head to an Italian restaurant where Billy had once been a waiter and interview Billy side by side with Larry Link, Billy’s so-called impresario.

In the meantime, however, Billy agreed to take the portrait out for the crew to see. He set it up in the basement of his parents’ house and the crew took turns coming close to look at it, wearing surgical masks that Billy provided for them, because the portrait, in pencil, was fragile and had not yet been framed. After some discussion, Chisolm was able to persuade Billy to let him film the portrait. Billy was initially and understandably vehemently opposed. After not having revealed the portrait to anyone, why would he let a camera crew film it now? Was this the right moment?

Even the crew wasn’t sure that the footage would make it into the final film. After all, the resolution of the shots wouldn’t be high enough to capture the resolution of the portrait itself, and Checkoway wasn’t certain if she would even reveal the portrait in the final film, leaving it perhaps a mystery to the viewer, something spoken of yet never seen.

In the end, Billy relented, and Chisolm filmed for about 15 minutes, up as close as he could get without his lens touching the camera’s surface, and Billy at his elbow, nervous, directing him to certain parts of the portrait he felt were worth the close scrutiny.

An Urgency To Finish

In May, Checkoway gave birth to a daughter, Sophia Grace Thomsen - coincidentally, on Billy Pappas' birthday.

"I called Billy at least once a week and got updates," she said, "but I would only hear about delays and talk and bumbings and more talk among Billy, Larry, and Brother Rene, Billy's so-called administrator. I started to wonder if this thing was ever going to happen and if maybe I ought to turn my attention elsewhere. I was completely frustrated by the fact that, however funny it was, Billy kept making these objects to send to David Hockney and Hockney kept not receiving them or someone would send them to a wrong address. That was part of the story---the bumbling quality of Team Billy---but my life was passing and I was tired of waiting."

At one point, David Hockney had miraculously phoned Gary Vikan. He had been moved by the sincerity of Billy Pappas's most recent letter and would indeed love to see the portrait. "Perhaps the next time I am flying over Baltimore?" Hockney said, and suggested that that time might be at Christmas. Billy and his team were jubilant. Hockney was coming at Christmas!

Only no one had stopped to ask Hockney exactly when or how or where and no one had any direct contact info for him. Christmas came and went and Checkoway marveled at how passive the team was.

It was during this time that Cookie Pappas and Gary Vikan both said to Checkoway with sighs, "Well, I guess the only thing we're doing is WAITING FOR HOCKNEY," and as the words came out of their mouths, Checkoway knew that that was the title of her film.

Lucky Break #1

WAITING FOR HOCKNEY editor Chris Peterson has a theory that every successful documentary has at least "one lucky break" by which he means that ordinary events conspire to make something extraordinary happen in the film's otherwise static plot. WAITING FOR HOCKNEY would have at least two lucky plot point breaks. The first came with Checkoway's call to Lawrence Weschler.

Checkoway called Weschler, because of an article he had written in the New Yorker in 2000 about his friend David Hockney. Checkoway inquired of Weschler whether, in his opinion, David Hockney would ever meet with Pappas given the ardent letters and gifts he had sent. After a brief conversation in which Weschler learned that Hockney had already agreed to see Pappas but that a date had yet to be arranged, he asked to see the portrait himself. He continued that, if he liked it well enough, he would recommend that Hockney see it right away.

Checkoway turned the information and opportunity over to Billy. She encouraged him to call Weschler to arrange a visit. Checkoway sent Chisolm to NY along with Billy to film whatever reaction might come out of that meeting. Soon after Billy's visit with Weschler, he was able to set a date to show Hockney the portrait in Los Angeles. Team Billy was flying to Los Angeles in late October.

LA Shoot

Checkoway wanted to capture the journey itself, the meeting with Hockney, and anything that happened afterwards. By this point, Neal Checkoway had come on to the project not as an advisor but as a producer. "Here was an arguably epic tale, actively in-process without a known ending – classical or otherwise – in sight." He joined the crew in LA to "follow these characters and this quest," he said, "and to help in any way I possibly could."

One of the most important aspects of the whole trip would never make it to film. A few days before leaving for LA, Billy received an angry email from Weschler, a good friend of Hockney's, who was unhappy with Billy out for trying to bring a film crew to the Hockney meeting. Weschler felt the request both rude and unrealistic and said that the very idea was threatening to make Hockney cancel the visit. The film crew would not be allowed into the meeting.

Now, Checkoway, Lickteig, and the rest of the film crew, which now included Checkoway's brother, Neal, as producer, had to contemplate what the final product of WAITING FOR HOCKNEY would look like if the meeting with Hockney took place entirely off camera. There were few options, other than to document in as detailed a way as possible the trips *to* Hockney's house, *from* Hockney's, and when the trip was over, and the reactions of the three men who were going---Gary Vikan, Brother Rene, and Billy.

But the night before the shoot, it occurred to Checkoway and her brother that without footage of the Hockney meeting itself, the film would need some kind of "clock" to register the suspense and passage of time while Billy was inside Hockney's house. They decided that Cookie Pappas, Billy's nervous and loving mother, was the perfect choice as she eagerly awaited her son's news. Checkoway hurriedly arranged for a cinematographer to follow Cookie throughout the next day as she waited for any word about Billy's fate.

Is That All There Is?

The upshot of the entire LA shoot was the most surprising to the crew: In Billy's estimation, Hockney "loved" the portrait and "Team Billy" stayed at Hockney's house for a full five hours. Upon returning to their hotel, each man told the same story, that, unbelievably, Billy Pappas had managed to reach David Hockney with his work and that Hockney had not only given Billy advice about how best to proceed with his next set of plans - to find someone to commission the next portrait - but also offered to help in some specific ways. This was Billy Pappas' dream come true.

This was not the end of the story, however. Checkoway decided to watch and wait. In the year that followed, despite the success of the Hockney visit, no significant change in Billy's life had occurred. Checkoway's calls to the Hockney studio, as she attempted to understand the disjunction between Billy's reported experience of the meeting and Hockney's silence since the meeting, were met with more puzzling silence.

Once again, the crew was faced with the question: where and how will this film end? Had the visit gone as well as the men had reported? If not, what had actually happened? If it had gone well, why were events taking a downward turn?

Pappas was so dissolute by this time that he was searching once again for a job as a waiter, in order to pay an enormous debt - some \$300,000 - that he owed to Larry Link for his support over the years. Checkoway sent in a crew to record his job-search and life in Choptank.

Enter an Oscar Winner

During this period, Geralyn White Dreyfous, the executive producer of the Oscar-winning documentary *Born into Brothels* had agreed to come on board WAITING FOR HOCKNEY as a producer. As it turns out, both Dreyfous and Checkoway, were living in Salt Lake City at the time; their children were attending the same school, and Dreyfous and Checkoway discovered, too, that they had both grown up in New England just 20 miles from one another, and they had graduated from the same college a year apart. The match seemed fateful.

Dreyfous had been involved with documentary storytelling and philanthropy for a long time. She had originally worked with Dr. Robert Coles at Harvard on the development of his groundbreaking magazine, *Doubletake*. Within a short period of time, Dreyfous had raised funds from both investors and philanthropists that would enable WAITING FOR HOCKNEY to go into post production.

Lucky Break #2

On a fundraising trip to New York, Dreyfous attended a dinner party to which a man named Charlie Scheips, a former assistant of David Hockney's had also been invited. When Dreyfous told Scheips that she was working on a film about David Hockney, Scheips put his hand over his mouth in shock. He knew what she was talking about: The Billy Pappas story.

"I was there," he told Geryl Dreyfous.

"What do you mean you were there?" she asked.

Scheips explained that he had been at Hockney's studio on the very day that Billy Pappas and his entourage had visited and that he even had pictures to prove it. He pulled out his I-pod, and sure enough, there were photos that showed the meeting with Pappas and Hockney, pictures that eerily mirrored those taken by Gary Vikan on the very same day. Scheips had an amazing story to tell that would flip the film on its side. His memories of that day were vivid. And, he was such an intimate of Hockney's that he felt comfortable in telling Dreyfous, and then again on camera for Checkoway in New York, about what Hockney had, in fact, felt and thought that day when Pappas and Team Billy had come to LA.

Post Production

Working with editor Chris Peterson, the principal at RED Editorial in LA, Checkoway approached the film asking: What was it that she as the storyteller wanted to say about Billy Pappas? What was it she wanted to say about the ways that Billy Pappas's life could teach us about our own? From those questions, Peterson and Checkoway began to construct on giant bulletin boards and white boards spread throughout their office both a story arc and a character arc. The larger question that faced them as they did so was: "Is Billy Pappas a hero or not? If he is, just what sort of hero is he?"

It is conventional wisdom among documentary filmmakers that the first third of a film is the hardest to construct. That was absolutely true with WAITING FOR HOCKNEY. Because Checkoway had not filmed Pappas during the making of the portrait but had begun shooting afterwards, the film had a heavy load of back story to cover. Plus, there were 80 hours of video (and the 30 hours of audio). Checkoway and Peterson, along with Neal Checkoway, who now took an active hand in the story editing, had to whittle things down to their most minimal and crystalline.

Peterson adopted a frenetic jump cut style to capture the caper-like quality and hypomania of the period of time during which Billy and his cohorts had developed their idea and pursued Hockney. Julie and Neal Checkoway dove into archival footage and stills from the Library of Congress and the Prelinger Archives to give the caper an antique and precious feel.

Dan Wilken, special effects editor at RED Editorial, took the film to a whole new level when he began to use Pappas's date books and Pappas's handwriting in composites that conveyed what Pappas had not said on film but which he said in other interviews. Wilken also used the datebooks to convey a sense of the passage of time during which Pappas had worked on the project. In addition to that, Peterson and Wilken made broad use of Pappas's sketches and notes to fill out the theory behind the making of the portrait.

A Team Effort

Post-production took two years, in large part because Checkoway was in Salt Lake City, Peterson in Los Angeles, and Neal Checkoway in Mexico. At last she and her brother worked out a proxy system whereby, via instant messaging and other means, she could for weeks at a time be in Salt Lake while he was in LA. She would direct the editing process, then fly in to do fine work with both her brother and with Peterson.

“Ultimately, ‘whatever way I possibly could’ would be a most-accurate description of my involvement,” Neal Checkoway says. Julie Checkoway says that the making of the film wouldn’t have been possible without her brother, GERALYN DREYFOUS, and the fine eye of Chris Peterson, among the many others who worked on WAITING FOR HOCKNEY.

“It was a total team effort,” she says. “Everybody pitched in, everybody gave over 100% to the project, in large part, I think, because there was just something about this story that gets under your skin. My brother notes that no one can ever have a neutral reaction to Billy Pappas’s story or to WAITING FOR HOCKNEY. There’s just something about Billy Pappas and Team Billy that Team WAITING FOR HOCKNEY just had, despite all odds, to see through.”

WAITING FOR HOCKNEY-COOKIE PAPPAS’ POPPYSEED CAKE

(From WAITING FOR HOCKNEY and Littlest Birds Films)

INGREDIENTS:

Duncan Hines Butter Cake Mix

1 C. Nonfat Yogurt

1 C. Poppy seeds

1 C. Granulated Sugar

1 Cup Vegetable Oil

4 Eggs

Crisco

Mix ingredients together in this order:

Cake mix, oil, sugar, poppy seeds, yogurt, then one egg at a time, with an electric mixer. Grease Bundt pan with Crisco then coat inside of pan with granulated sugar. Use a knife to run through the batter once to avoid having any bubbles in the finished cake. Bake in a 350 degree oven for 45 minutes and put on a nice paper dolly.