

When Zachary Beaver Came to Town

About The Production

Writer and Director John Schultz's talent for connecting creatively with young actors is once again realized in his latest film *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town*. Shot in small town Granger, Texas, the film stars Jonathan Lipnicki, Eric Stoltz, Jane Krakowski, and Kevin Corrigan, along with newcomers Sasha Neulinger, and Cody Linley.

Based on the award winning novel by Kimberly Willis Holt, "When Zachary Beaver Came to Town" is the coming of age story of 12-year-old Toby Wilson (Jonathan Lipnicki) who, during one unforgettable summer in his tiny Texas town, learns what tragedy, friendship, adventure, loyalty and faith really mean after he meets Zachary Beaver (Sasha Neulinger), a side show attraction billed as "The Fattest Boy in the World".

When Zachary Beaver Came to Town is produced by Amy Robinson, Jay Julien and Michael Corrente. It is financed by Revere Pictures and executive produced by Roger Marino.

The film reunites Schultz with actors Jonathan Lipnicki (*Like Mike*) and Kevin Corrigan (*Bandwagon*), with producer Amy Robinson (*Drive Me Crazy*), and with the behind-the-scenes creative team of cinematographer Shawn Maurer (*Like Mike* and *Bandwagon*) and editor John Pace (*Like Mike*, *Drive Me Crazy*, and *Bandwagon*).

'How Zachary Beaver Got To Town'

The road to making *Zachary Beaver* began in 1999, when producer Jay Julien read The New York Times book review of Kimberly Willis Holt's young adult novel, [When Zachary Beaver Came to Town](#). The review extols: "Kimberly Willis Holt tenderly captures small-town life and deftly fills it with decent characters who ring true...her novel offers a slice of life that's hard to resist." Indeed, it was hard to resist; this poignant story about the true power of friendship, which won the 1999 National Book Award for young people's literature, struck Julien immediately as strong material for a film.

And, he wasn't the only one who quickly saw the book's strong cinematic potential. It wasn't long after Julien had optioned the film rights that his office was contacted by

young star Jonathan Lipnicki. Lipnicki had read the book independently and wanted to play the lead role of Toby Wilson. On casting Lipnicki, Julien recounts: “Even before we had a script, Jonathan approached us - that’s how it all happened. Now that doesn’t mean that we wouldn’t have gone to him - we would have - but originally he picked us.”

Lipnicki remembers: “My mom and I both read the book and really liked it. And we said to each other ‘you know this would be a great movie.’ The story’s so great that I thought it would be weird if somebody didn’t have it by then. And it turned out that somebody did.”

That the material appeals equally to both children and adults, attests to the strength of the story and to the universality of its themes. Passionate and humorous, heartbreaking and uplifting, Holt’s extraordinary novel successfully combines young characters with grown-up themes resulting in a story for everyone.

Producer Jay Julien elaborates: “Children’s books are not necessarily just books for children. Sometimes they are something more and I thought this was something more.”

Through the example of the hero played by Lipnicki, we are reminded, as Julien puts it, “that this country is a place of essential decency.” More specifically, Toby’s story illustrates the true power of friendship in all of our lives to battle and overcome life’s most difficult lessons.

Veteran producer Amy Robinson agreed that the novel told a powerful story, but with funny, human elements and she joined forces with Julien early on to develop the material. Robinson comments: “It is a great ‘fish out of water’ story told with complex characters in sometimes very funny and sometimes very serious ways.”

She too saw in the book a story that everyone could relate to, irrespective of his or her age. “I always think that stories like this cross over because everybody grew up. Everyone can relate to what happens in the story. So I think it’s a movie that parents may want to take their kids to, but also it’s a movie that parents and even teenagers can enjoy.”

Robinson and Julien approached writer/director John Schultz, with whom Robinson had made *Drive Me Crazy*, to adapt the novel for the screen. Robinson remembers: “I thought of John right away because having made *Drive Me Crazy* with him, I knew his sensibility and I knew that the story of these boys growing up would appeal to him.”

It did appeal to him immediately. Director John Schultz remembers: “I went to dinner with Amy and she handed me a book and said, ‘You should make this into a movie.’” I read it that night and agreed. I loved the story; it worked incredibly well, yet was so simple, and that is perfect for a movie. I was attracted more than anything to the characters. Toby and his friends seemed like people I could understand.”

Schultz also looked forward to working on a second film with producer Amy Robinson: “Amy and I see things the same way. We both like movies with identifiable characters and we both find humor in a lot of unexpected places. She brings a great legitimacy to any project. So does Jay - Jay never doubted we would make this movie; he was amazing that way.”

Producers Robinson and Julien contacted the newly formed production company Revere Pictures and its founders: producer/director Michael Corrente and financier Roger Marino.

Corrente was excited to have the opportunity to work with Robinson, whose work he has long admired. Corrente remembers: “My assistant said ‘Amy Robinson called for you’ and I said ‘Amy Robinson the producer?’ He said ‘yes, what should I tell her?’ I said ‘tell her I want to talk to her!’ I have been a huge fan of Amy’s since *Mean Streets* and then when she went on to start producing with Griffin Dunne. She’d always made a lot of wonderful, interesting movies and I thought it was great to be in a position to actually have a conversation with her and work with her.”

Fate played her hand when executive producer Roger Marino, with the as yet unread “Zachary Beaver” script in hand, discovered his twelve-year old son reading and enjoying the book *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town*. Marino thought that was a pretty good recommendation! Revere decided to finance the project with Corrente coming on board as a producer, along with Marino as Executive Producer.

But it was Schultz’s script and Holt’s story that really won over Revere. When he read the script, Marino says he knew they had their hands on “a real find”. Corrente and Marino found the story fun and sweet, but more substantial than your average children’s story. Corrente comments: “Three young boys having to deal with that kind of loss in their lives and then having - at such a young age - to come to terms with that loss and having each other to lean on - it just seemed a little bit more realistic than most little kids’ movies. It had that sort of *Stand by Me* feel to it - a really honest tone.”

Like *Stand by Me*, Revere believes *Zachary Beaver* has the potential to be “the kind of picture that kids can claim as their own,” notes Corrente, “a picture they can see and say ‘somebody does understand us.’ At the same time, it has the potential to cross over and engage an older audience as well.”

Revere’s philosophy and mandate is one that champions the filmmaker and respects his creative process. Corrente says: “We want the filmmakers out there to know that they can come to us with interesting projects that make sense and we’ll let them make the movie that they want to make. I don’t think I said two words creatively to John Schultz except: ‘Go get’em- have a blast. You have X number of dollars to make the movie, so let’s go do it!’ and he did it.”

Director John Schultz has nothing but praise for Revere Pictures and producer Michael Corrente. Says Schultz: “Michael is sitting on the best deal a filmmaker could wish for.

He, as a filmmaker himself, has set up his company in a way that really does put the film and filmmaker first. We should build a statue of Michael in front of the DGA building. I'll look into it.”

In turn, the producers felt Schultz was a perfect match for the project. Julien says of Schultz: “He’s got a lively intellect and he’s very much in tune with today. He is able to catch onto the thoughts and feelings of young people.”

Robinson elaborates: “John’s strength is that he has a very clear and entertaining voice, both as a writer and a director. He has a very good connection with his youthful self, so the story does not ring false when he writes it. He relates to young actors very well on set as well as through his writing.”

All are in agreement that Schultz has a very youthful spirit and creative eye. Producer Michael Corrente jokes: “Is John much older than Jonathan Lipnicki?” Kidding aside, Corrente agrees: “He’s like a kid himself and smart and fun and he’s been making movies since he was Lipnicki’s age.”

Amidst the humor and drama of everyday life, the story focuses on the friendship between three young boys and reveals the budding maturity with which they are able to cope with their loss and grief. Producer Jay Julien explains his view on the essence of the story: “The humanity of the setup is emphasized by the friendship that takes place between these children, who somehow understand the pain that they all are undergoing. One boy has lost his mother to death, the other is losing his mother to Nashville and the third is losing his beloved brother to war. Now look at that situation. They all come together - not to moan about their loss - but to move forward in a very positive way using that loss.”

Julien continues: “Toby and Cal really band together to save Zachary from more pain. Because, what could be more painful than for a New York fat kid to be sent into a Texas foster home by himself? And so without even understanding it really, the hero (Lipnicki) goes to all kinds of lengths to rescue his new friend in what becomes an adventure in - let’s call it - ‘the opposite of war,’ in joining people together. That’s Toby’s passage from childhood to adulthood.”

Toby’s journey may make him face heartache and loss, but the story and the film are anything but dark. The special magic of *Zachary Beaver* is how it manages to address these issues amidst the hilarity and adventure of real life. Robinson elaborates: “The messages of the story come across in a very non-Sunday school, non preachy way. The movie is a lot of fun, but within that fun, some serious things are happening.”

Schultz agrees: “The story is about being left on your own, and growing as a result. But Kimberly was able to keep it fun, and not down. There is a lot of humor for such a realistic topic.”

Schultz's adaptation of Holt's novel maintained the story's spirit and stayed true to its characters, but with some additions and alterations. Speaking as both writer and director, Schultz describes his adaptation process: "Books and movies are so different - more than you could realize until you try an adaptation. As simple of a story as *Zachary Beaver* is, I still had to eliminate and combine many characters and events, as well as add a whole second-act "road trip" adventure sequence with Toby and Zachary.

"The point of the "road trip" was to get across the same ideas and growth that were in the book, but in a visually kinetic way, because that's how movies work best. Toby had a lot of internal dialogue going on as Zachary sat in the trailer, but I had to show Toby getting to the results of his internal novel dialogue. Movies are vastly simpler mentally, than books. We show, not tell. And the viewer's brain is in a very different mode than an actively engaged reader—so a filmmaker has to keep the relaxed movie-goer's brain from shutting off."

"The cast came together just fantastically on this movie," says producer Amy Robinson. Eric Stoltz, Kevin Corrigan, and Jane Krakowski play adult roles in a kid-centered story, which rests largely on the young, but highly talented shoulders of Jonathan Lipnicki, Sasha Neulinger and Cody Linley, who are, 'the nicest, sweetest, most talented boys,' to quote Robinson.

And what does the book's author have to say about the casting of her fictional characters? Both Lipnicki and Robinson recall that when Kimberly Willis Holt came to the set, she gave the cast the ultimate compliment, commenting that Lipnicki and his friends looked exactly like she had imagined them in her mind, and she was very happy.

Holt elaborates: "When I heard that Jonathan Lipnicki was playing Toby, right away I thought he was a perfect match. I wasn't familiar with the other boys, but as soon as I saw Sasha and Cody speak their lines, I knew they were meant for those roles. They blew me away. And when Lou Perryman, who plays Ferris, mentioned that another, more known actor had been considered for his role, I told him that although I liked that actor's work, he (Lou) was Ferris. The costume director showed me pictures of the other cast members and I was amazed at how much they reminded me of the people in my book."

Eric Stoltz, like many involved in this project, needed no prodding to come on board as Otto Wilson, Lipnicki's father in the film. "Eric read the script by chance and came to us interested in the role, so he was clearly 'into' it," remembers Schultz. "That was a great thing, to have such a talent connecting with the material - he elevated the whole enterprise. And any actor who has directed, such as Eric, is a treat because they really understand the nuances of the chaos on set. And, Eric loves working with children and is very patient."

To play Toby's (Lipnicki's) mother Heather Wilson, (the aspiring country/western singer who leaves town to make it big in Nashville), the filmmakers cast Jane Krakowski. Schultz explains "I wanted a Heather who the audience would miss, and Jane did a great

job making a strong impact early in the film. When she leaves, we notice. Plus, Jane and Eric could easily be Jonathan's parents - they made a genetically believable family!"

Schultz was happy to reunite with actor Kevin Corrigan who was cast as the colorful and quirky Paulie, guardian and business manager to the one-man side show which is Zachary Beaver. "I've wanted to work with Kevin Corrigan again ever since he starred in my first film, *Bandwagon*. We are friends - which immediately makes communicating better. He loved the character, and brought a hilarious contrast to the Texas setting."

Schultz beams: "I was so fortunate with the kid casting, because the adults mentioned above were so talented, that the young actors had a lot to measure up to...and they did!"

A young, but seasoned star, Jonathan Lipnicki, plays Toby Wilson, the story's hero, through whose eyes we witness this unusual and unforgettable summer unfold. "Jonathan is a unique performer. He is totally unselfconscious and gives a director many surprises," says Schultz. "And he is also very funny, a great physical comedian. Jonathan is serious about acting, and very professional, but still a regular kid. He connected a lot with Toby, and always had ideas. I used many of them - I mean, after all, he really is a 12-year-old kid."

Newcomer Sasha Neulinger plays Zachary Beaver, the so-called '*fattest boy in the world*.' "What a find!" says Schultz, "This kid is hilarious and very, very talented. Sasha has an amazing intuition, as if he has been acting on camera for years. It's weird."

Together, Lipnicki's Toby and Neulinger's Zachary are so funny to watch that you can't help but think of them as "a young Laurel and Hardy," observes Robinson.

Cody Linley completes the trio of boys on which the story is focused, playing Cal McKnight, Toby's best friend, whose brother Wayne is in the Army. "He had perhaps the toughest role," notes Schultz, "and he was incredible. Cody loves acting and is great at it. His questions, insights and level of detail are uncanny. I've never seen an actor enjoy acting as much as Cody. After a good take it's like he's scored a touchdown, he's so happy."

When asked what his special talent is for working so successfully with young actors, director John Schultz jokes, "I threaten them in a calm and steady voice so they know that I mean it." Producer Amy Robinson gives the real answer: "John is a very supportive director—and he is very humorous and he knows what he wants. He gives the kids a lot of confidence that they can give what he wants and he gives them a lot of encouragement, particularly with Jonathan Lipnicki, who had worked with him before. They already had a short hand and Jonathan also trusted him a lot because he saw the finished product of *Like Mike*, and he was really very happy with his performance in that. He gave John a lot of credit for it."

Lipnicki concurs: "I've worked with John twice and that is because he's so easy to work with. He's very nice and he lets me have ideas and really explore my character...Also,

John is just amazing at editing; so, even if I don't feel I got it right, I know he can cut it so it's ten times better!"

But on the set of *Zachary Beaver*, it wasn't all straight work for Lipnicki and his fellow co-stars. The young boys had a lot of fun too. Says Robinson: "When we were shooting the movie, it was very funny because the boys got to do so many things that in real life they'd be punished for: throwing rocks at people or riding their bikes into a pond or stealing a car. It was like heaven for Jonathan Lipnicki to act like he was stealing this car and driving it." Lipnicki remembers fondly his twelve-year-old efforts to steer a truck in reverse during a shot: "I was actually steering and we had a stunt man with a seat cover over his head doing the driving. I was going in reverse and there was a low hanging branch that I didn't see, and I hit it and almost hit Sasha (Zachary), who was sitting in the back!"

In both his writing and directing, Schultz wanted to stay true to the setting and feeling of the book's classic Texan town: "I love the way *Bonnie and Clyde* looks - a very clean, natural small town look. That's how I wanted this to look. I could feel that look when I read the book and I knew it was right for the story."

Schultz found that the authentic, unchanging Texan town portrayed in the book was easy to capture despite the fact that the book was set in 1971, and the script had been updated to present day. Says Schultz: "Updating it was easy - there are so many classic "one stoplight towns" in Texas that remain timeless - it could be 1950, 1971, 2003, or 2023 and the essence of the town, the light, the buildings, is the same." The location finally chosen for filming was Granger, a small town outside of Austin.

Granger was as close to the book's fictitious town of Antler as possible. Author Holt notes "With the exception of a missing courthouse, the town was Antler. It was magical to see a town that I wrote about come to life. And Zachary's trailer even had the Christmas lights! Seeing the set, gave me a surreal feeling."

The quintessential small-town, like the vast Texan landscape, is a strong character in the film. Granger offered the filmmakers the opportunity to depict the peaceful, picturesque qualities of the American town as well as its potentially lackluster and suffocating attributes.

Says Robinson: "John was very interested in contrasting both the idyllic nature of the small town with the desire for Toby's mom to want to leave. We chose to shoot in a location where the houses were small and perfect and yet also gave the feeling of being insular and limited."

The wide-open Texan landscape was underscored by Schultz's choice to shoot in wide screen. Schultz explains: "Shooting wide screen offers the advantage of capturing the vast country side which surrounds these towns, and also 'opens up' the film's tighter quarters, like Zachary's little trailer."

In a tiny town where nothing ever happens, Zachary's arrival is grand news and all the more so because of his unusual entrance. Schultz and his team of designers wanted to underline Zachary's differences and the fact that he was a stranger to this town. Schultz describes: "We used earth tones a lot in the neighborhood and town, and brought the showy primary colors in with the side show to highlight the fact that Zachary and Paulie bring in a garishness that is foreign to the town."

To quote Executive Producer Roger Marino: "if the material is good and the people are good then the product should be good." Powerful story, passionate producers, inspired writing and directing and a talented cast all come together on this very special project.

"*When Zachary Beaver Came to Town* is an ensemble piece," concludes Corrente. "To have a producer like Amy Robinson on board and Susan Kirr, the line producer, along with Jay Julien, and to have the highly talented John Schultz at the helm – the team that was put together to get this picture made – it's made it such a pleasure to produce.

"The fact that every one is so good and solid and the performances are all really really believable and strong is what's going to make this picture successful. All the pictures we make should go this smoothly."