

THE AFFABLE EXPERIMENTALIST: FRANK MOSLEY

by Jonathan Kiefer / July 8, 2016

Frank Mosley has a growing heap of acting credits, his indie cred well established within distinctive roles in Shane Carruth's *Upstream Color*, Cameron Bruce Nelson's *Some Beasts*, and David Lowery's *Ain't Them Bodies Saints*, among many others. Possibly Mosley's best asset, performance-wise, is a pair of soulful eyes, behind which there always seems to be something going on.

Mosley, who grew up in Dallas and moved to Austin last fall, also is a filmmaker himself, less in the manner of "What I really want to do is direct," as per Mel Brooks, than the John Cassavetes mode of viewing commercial acting work as one means to the end of non-commercial directing work. Thoughtful, approachable, and unpretentiously curious about the nature of motion-picture artifice, he's the sort of experimentalist we don't see often enough.

As becomes clear in his feature *Hold*, a slyly subversive home-invasion drama, and the punning short *Two Story*, a twice-recited real estate listing-cum-study of souls as ships in the night, Mosley is singularly attuned to the dissonances — and unusual harmonies — that arise within domestic spaces and interior lives. More opaquely, that same affinity also permeates his long-gestated work *Her Wilderness*, a delicately fate-fixated mid-length enigma which brought to mind Kieslowski's *Red*, one of my favorite films ever, somehow while also seeming entirely unlike it. This was hard to explain to Mosley, but with what seems like characteristic grace he took the compliment.

Our recent phone conversation took place prior to the death of Abbas Kiarostami, with whom Mosley briefly worked, so his comments about that collaboration, like the late master's films, shall remain here forever in the present tense.

I've only seen *Her Wilderness* once, so I wonder if I'm not yet fully qualified to discuss it with you. How does that make you feel?

It feels great! It's that kind of film. Something that's gonna be kind of a puzzle. I wrote it with the idea of having something that could work in different ways at different points in your life.

How did it come to be?

I'd just come off my first feature, *Hold*, and that was written by my best friend. *Hold* wasn't intended to be my first feature. But he came to me and said, 'I think you'd be right for this material.' So it was a test to focus on the actors and direction. I'm really proud of what that film was. At the same time, there was a part of me that always leaned toward the experimental. I got a taste for that, and I really wanted to go all out. I wanted to do something that was just me as a writer-director.

Originally *Her Wilderness* was just me trying to explore how minimal I could get: How big of a world could I capture with only three scenes? It started off like a Pinteresque play. I did a staged reading of it to get some money, and I only got enough money from Indiegogo to shoot the scenes with the adults. The little girl was later. I realized that it needed something as a cohesive thread. I also was inspired by Edward Albee's play *Three Tall Women*, with characters coexisting but at different stages of life. All the adults are trapped in these rooms... but then there's the kid, who can roam. And that part was about two years after we shot the first stuff.

Is it hard to maintain your momentum, or even your vision, over such a long period?

Every film's a baby, and you're proud of it. I feel like if you did it, even if there are things you didn't like, you still appreciate what it

gave you. By the time we got to the second wave of shooting, it's like, 'Damn, I could have reshot this or that.' The final edit of the film is structurally different from what it had been originally. Mostly I just feel like it's an old movie. Usually, as an actor, you'd work on something and then it came out about a year later. The fact that we started shooting this in '09...it feels like something from long ago!

Within scenes, within shots, even within dialogue, Her Wilderness is a movie of ellipses. What's not in matters as much as what is. And it's sort of heavy and light at the same time. How do you get that balance?

I definitely wanted it to feel breezy. I wanted it to feel like all the other scenes that get cut out from a regular movie. And I wanted to play with that quality of it. But it's not the kind of movie that's gonna get picked up. If I know it's experimental, that's not gonna change. I thought it would be taken in by international festivals more easily. But even in the States it was a really hard sell. Ultimately, the movie just needs to be what it needs to be.

The script was really tough for me. It was really tough to write a movie where each character only has a couple scenes to show who they are. I was inspired by *Last Year at Marienbad*, and the repetition of this thing that might not have even happened. And these characters are different people depending on who they're with. It was really

tricky to write the dialogue like that and really take the time. It helped that it felt like a true collaboration. It's like theater, when you do a play. It's about the house of cards thing — one piece falls and the whole thing collapses. Everybody knew they were part of that. They wanted to do it. I really appreciate people giving it so much.

How did you get started in film?

Both my parents have been very supportive. It all really started with my dad. From a very early age, he showed me silents, foreign films, everything. He had a Hi-8 Sony Handicam on loan from a relative, and he was bored one day, and we did *The Wizard of Oz*. I played every character. I was so addicted to movies from about four years old. Then a little older, it's just make-believe with your friends, but I had access to a camera to bottle it. I just kept going. I was huge in theater in high school. I did *Dr. Strangelove* for the stage. And I would steal the theater actors on the weekends for movies. Then in college I was an English major, but I took film on the side. I made a lot of the friends that I still work with. It's different for everybody. You have your periods of doubt. That's good. That's a great thing to have. But it's always something I can come back to.

Are you able to talk specifically about how your experiences as an actor inform your experiences as a director, and vice versa?

The good thing is that if I'm tired of one, I can just do the other! The one thing that I try to do, and this is different for everybody, is that I don't like to really act in my stuff, as much. I will occasionally. But I think having that distinction allows more focus for me. So I can immerse myself with artists that I really want to work with. It's one thing to say that I'm a working actor. But being a director, you really want to work with people you admire — like Jon Jost, to name one example. If I was just an actor always thinking about, 'Oh, I've got to get the big break,' I wouldn't think that way and I'd have different experiences. I think it all factors into the subconscious. Your favorite directors when you're sixteen are different from your favorites in your thirties and forties. You learn how to talk to other actors. But you also learn how to be open to unconventional ideas, to not be worried just about your image. If a director wanted to shoot a whole scene from the back of my head, I would be totally into that!

Recently you did a filmmaking workshop in Cuba with Abbas Kiarostami. What was that like?

One of the best times of my life. *Her Wilderness* had taken so long to get done. I then did a short film called *Spider Veins*. It felt like everything came together so easily. And I was almost burnt out. I had everything at my disposal. The biggest crew I'd had, and somehow I was disinterested. So I knew I needed a kick in the ass. Part of my application was about how I wanted to be put outside of my comfort zone. When I applied, I thought I didn't have a chance in hell. So I

submitted *Spider Veins* and answered some essay questions. Not only did I get in, but my friend Cameron did too. We were the only two people who knew each other. It was fifty people all living together in an art commune. Kiarostami just walks around. He's the most affable, approachable person, for the legend that he is. You have to come up with the story on the spot, pitch it to him, then go with the equipment you can fit in a suitcase. I came away with a twelve-minute short, called *Casa di Mi Madre*. It was a really special project because it was done so much on the fly. When I discovered the woman who I wanted to play the lead, I had a translator pitch my idea to her. Hearing it, she starts tearing up. I think: 'Ok, I *have* to do this.' Yeah, directing in another language certainly got me out of my comfort zone.