

WARNING: EXPLOSIVE WOMAN ON THE SCENE

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Kimberly Gadette interviews go-to female action director Kathryn Bigelow on *The Hurt Locker*, her latest film and one that's blasting through movie theaters to great acclaim.

Kathryn Bigelow has been breaking, rather, smashing the mold of the male-dominated directorial world since she first blazed a name for herself with the 1982 indie biker film *The Loveless* (marking the debut of Willem Dafoe). Her second effort put her on the map, the 1987 vampire-themed *Near Dark*, still considered a cult horror classic. She's dealt with a female rookie in the testosterone-driven world of the NYPD (*Blue Steel*), hard-bodied surfer boys turned bank robbers (*Point Break*), a cyber punk sci-fi story playing with gender balance (*Strange Days*) and a cold war confrontation on a Russian nuclear submarine (*K19: The Widowmaker*).

In other words, don't expect any films from Bigelow in the mode of *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*.

She's now returned with a bang to a muscular, male-themed exploration with her latest film, *The Hurt Locker*. Winner of the 2008 Venice Film Festival SIGNIS Grand Prize, the movie is an intense portrayal of three members of the US Army's elite bomb squad deployed to Baghdad, circa 2004. These soldiers colloquially speak of bomb explosions as "putting you in the hurt locker."

Gadette recently sat down for a one-on-one discussion with the tall, slender Bigelow. Dressed in a loose-fitting, sleeveless silk blue blouse, slacks and sexy sandals, Bigelow gave off the graceful air of an extraordinarily bright ballerina. But cracking the whip in an insufferably hot Middle Eastern desert? This gracious woman? It seemed hard to imagine.

IMO: *Previous films set in or about Iraq have not gone over well with the American public. What was it about this story that intrigued you enough to dispel all the possible concerns?*

KB: I think of this as a war film, rather than an Iraq war film, which means its lineage is perhaps greater and longer. I think of this film having more in common with war films like *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Apocalypse Now*, in that it's the crucible of war and how it defines these individuals.

What also made this story special was that we had the opportunity of firsthand observation because it's based on writer Mark Boal's journalistic embed. He was able to tell the story through the soldiers' eyes, to actually humanize those soldiers who were highly specialized bomb techs. He went over there in 2004, right when bombs had become the weapon of choice for this particular insurgency, meaning that the bomb squad was suddenly at the epicenter of this particular conflict.



IMO: *I've read a lot about how this isn't a political film. But during the many scenes about the dismantling of IEDs, you show Iraqi citizens looking on either passively or with hostility, some who'd probably set the bombs in the first place. To me, it's very much a statement about how unwelcome the Americans are. That the Iraqis don't particularly care if the soldiers get blown up or not. And that to me did seem political, in that America truly has no business there.*

KB: It certainly could be interpreted that way. But Mark's journalistic embed was with the soldiers, so that was his POV. Therefore that's the script POV; therefore that's the movie's POV. Our mandate going in was to make this as realistic and authentic as possible.

IMO: *Did he travel to Iraq specifically with the idea of writing a script?*

KB: No, he was on assignment, writing an article for *Playboy Magazine*. He's a very rich source of material on the Iraq War – one of his articles was developed by Paul Haggis into *In The Valley of Elah*. We knew each other previously, and I was very curious when I learned that he was going over on this embed – I think that I, perhaps not unlike a member of the general public, felt the conflict was a bit abstract, somewhat underreported, and welcomed any opportunity for some specificity. Once he returned, I was really knocked out by the concept of "a day in the life of a bomb tech." These were individuals, women bomb techs, too, that I think --

IMO: *There are women bomb techs?*

KB: Not very many; I don't have the fuzzy math on it, but I met one when I was doing research in the Mojave Desert in California, at Fort Irwin. I was checking out the specifications on the official Kevlar bomb suit and I noticed an individual outfitted in one. This person turned around, took off the helmet, and there was this long cascade of red, curly hair. [*Her long arm sweeps over her own length of straight brown hair, pantomiming the action. She smiles broadly.*] It was the first time I realized that there were women bomb techs as well.

In fact, as I did more research I came to know that the EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) squad doesn't self-select along gender lines whatsoever. It's based on your IQ, and you have to have incredibly dexterous motor skills, like a surgeon, and to be able to make a multitude of decisions under extreme pressure.



IMO: *I had read that only 40% of EOD candidates graduate, that the testing is extremely rigorous. Yet in the film we see that the youngest member of the team, Owen (Brian Geraghty), is falling apart. Would that be due to the fact that he was nearing the end of his tour, and that his personality was a lot more stable going into Iraq than coming out?*

KB: It's more about the team leader; the person who's going to put on the bomb suit and take, what's called in the tech terms, "the lonely walk." You walk toward what everybody else is running from. Owen was part of the up-range support team; even though the entire team is well-versed in bomb disarmament, it's only the leader who takes the walk.

And it's the leader who's in charge of the actual bomb disarmament, he's the one bending over a live IED (Improvised Explosive Device).

IMO: *So Owen was fine before the new leader James (Jeremy Renner) arrived?*

KB: Absolutely fine, exactly, but he become unmoored with the intro of this new team leader who, perhaps to the slightly somewhat unseasoned eye, looked reckless. That created an instability within the team, questioning what was more dangerous: the bomb or the team leader? They came to realize that it was that magic combination of bravado and a profound skill set that kept them alive – whether or not they agreed with it.

IMO: *Speaking of skill sets: given your prior life as an artist, your two years of study at the San Francisco Art Institute – how would you say that addresses your skill set as a director?*

KB: I think it's enabled me to have a certain amount of confidence with the craft. I also don't think I could have directed this movie without having done the prior films as well, but the art background certainly helped me in understanding and organizing space. Going from 2D to 3D, it helped enormously. These are very large sets, because bomb disarmament mandates a 100 to 200 to 300 meter target; and so to be able to choreograph, and then edit the shots within this vast landscape, and to keep it constantly clear for the audience ...

I think it's very important that the audience never loses their geographic sense of where they are in relation to the bomb. Even though things can happen quickly, or cuts can be quick or the camera can be in motion, the geography must be preserved.



IMO: *I found this quote on directing by Jodie Foster: She says "everything you do as a director is about reading: reading deeper, reading between the lines,*



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as well?

KB: [pausing before answering] That's beautiful. I think that you certainly are trying to work within any given situation or moment or performance or shot, and trying to massage as much detail and specificity into any given moment. I think I may have a different interpretation of what she's saying, but nonetheless I agree that it's an opportunity not to simplify, but deepen and enrich.

IMO: *As this film's director, you've masterfully created suspense in your utilization of time. I'm thinking that Hitchcock would be very impressed!* [Bigelow flashes a big smile, then laughs] *Not just in the minutes ticking off toward possible death, but in the days ticking off toward possible life. Either way, it's a release out of Iraq. Had you always purposely set up that parallel construct?*

KB: Yes, even in the script's earliest drafts. We created a scenario that had a sense of time in relation to, vis-à-vis, potential catastrophe; having a sense of a clock at work is very critical not just in the length of the tour of duty, but time on the ground. Mark told me these stories about bomb techs who would keep their time on the ground extremely short – sometimes as short as 45 seconds, their time from the Humvee to the bomb to the disarmament. The soldier's survival depends on the length of exposure – because they don't know if the gentleman on the third floor balcony is hanging out his laundry or calling in a sniper strike. So we use the constant reminder of time as a parameter, both as a safety device and a lethal device.

IMO: *The first explosion scene where the rust peels off an old car. How many takes did you have to do?*

KB: We did that explosion only twice. I had a phenomenal special effects team headed by Richard Stutsman, an incredible artist.



IMO: *The production notes refer to the fact that the script went through 17 drafts. 17? Honestly?*

KB: Give or take. Mark finished the script before we knew exactly where we were going to shoot it. We were thinking about Morocco, but it didn't look quite right. When we realized we had the opportunity to shoot in Amman, Jordan, some of the locations were different than how we'd imagined, and that necessitated rewrites. For example, the location of the U.N. building was written as a single elevation, but we found this great location, an elevated building with balconies, so the script had to be redesigned for that specific space. And so there were a few extra drafts.

IMO: *Mark Boal was on the set the whole set the whole time?*

KB: The whole time.

IMO: *You see this a lot, where the actors are very clever at adlibbing something that's funny and cute and screams "look at me" – but it's not necessarily germane to the story. This script was so dead on. I'm assuming that since Mark was available for rewrites, there was no adlibbing on the part of the actors at all. That this was pretty much yours and Mark's vision.*

KB: Pretty much; but on the other hand, we were all there together. The good news about taking this whole shoot and making it a total immersion into the Middle East was that it was almost like a Sartre play ... there was "No Exit," and everyone was stuck there. So we all had a shared vision of this movie. Especially Mark and I, but then once the cast got on board, all five of us shared the same objective, and so this script was very naturalistic; we all wanted it to feel like the dialogue was fresh, just spoken. A lot of times the actors had great ideas and we'd incorporate them into the movie; but at the same time, I think the script was a fairly tight and taut buttoned-up piece. I think it gave the cast a great point of departure so they felt they were on solid ground with the material as scripted.



IMO: *The film opens with a quote from war correspondent Chris Hedges' book, War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning. Could you say that that particular title gives you meaning as a director? That this is perhaps a defining moment in your own career?*

KB: That's very kind of you to say. I certainly felt extremely fortunate to have access to this material and to this cast. And to have the opportunity to shoot a movie about the Middle East, actually in the Middle East. All the pieces just came together, gained a sort of critical mass that I was part of, and intrinsic to, but it had a traction and a momentum all its own. I guess you could say that in this case, this production is a force that gives us a meaning.

IMO: *You notice that I haven't brought up the fact that you're known as the pre-eminent female sci-fi/action director. I'm trying to be respectful and not bother you with that.*

KB: Oh no, no, you're so sweet. But I do think there's a point, um, let's hope for a time when it's no longer unique. I really do think it's changing across the board, not just in production. A woman senator almost became president, you have an African American president – I think all of a sudden those classifications, those demarcations are disappearing. And it's finally a matter of the work speaking for itself.

IMO: *Isn't it also economics? Now that it's cheaper to make a film, you're not dependent on the large, white, all-male middle-class comprising the studio system to say yay or nay.*

KB: [grinning] There you go!

IMO: *Look at what you did. You went out and got your own funding, you did your own film, you got final cut ...*

KB: Yes, we had total creative control in doing it that way. Though many filmmakers have gone that route in the past, I'm ever hopeful that this is an MO that others will continue to pursue in the future.

An overview of the film

After seven previous films, director Kathryn Bigelow has finally found a screenwriter in Mark Boal who not only matches her intensity, but is finally able to maximize her visual artistry in drawing a fully realized story, packed with characters who are as vibrant as the visual whole.

Picture a ticking bomb. Add in three-dimensional characters, some who love the thrill of outwitting that bomb, some who simply hope to see another day. Put them in the hottest desert imaginable, under hostile conditions. Yes, we've seen scattered scenes like this in many other movies. But in this case, it's not a few scenes. It's the majority of the film.

Starting off with a brutal bang, *The Hurt Locker* introduces Staff Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner), who takes over an elite bomb detonation team in the middle of war-torn Iraq. But he's not the careful leader that his men have previously known; he's a bomb himself, unpredictable and dangerous, capable of exploding at any time, taking his team with him. As the days tick off toward the end of the soldiers' tour, the minutes tick as well, perhaps toward another, grimmer finality.

This is a career-changing role for Renner – though he's worked steadily in Hollywood for ten years, this film allows him to showcase his immeasurable talents: charismatic and smart, yet with layers of troubled depth flashing every so often behind a seemingly casual stare. By depicting him as constricted in a bomb suit as he is back home with his family, the filmmakers capitalize on revealing the conflicted man behind the swagger.

Superb in their own right, Anthony Mackie's strong Sergeant Sanborn and Brian Geraghty's frightened Owen work in perfect rhythm to Renner, creating a unique, dramatic whole.

The film is fraught with tension and complexity. As well as stunning images that will last in your mind long after you've left the theater.

There are times when extraordinary raves for a film can seem puzzling. In the case of *The Hurt Locker*, they may not be glowing enough.

Release date: US: July 10, 2009; UK: August 28, 2009

Directed by: Kathryn Bigelow

Written by: Mark Boal

Cast: Jeremy Renner, Anthony Mackie, Brian Geraghty, Guy Pearce, Ralph Fiennes, David Morse, Evangeline Lilly, Christian Camargo

Rating: US = R; UK = 15

Running time: 131 minutes