

ON THE MARK

IT'S NO ACCIDENT THAT SARAH GREEN AND BRIAN KAVANAUGH-JONES EARNED THE PRODUCERS MARK CERTIFICATION FOR *THE BIKERIDERS*.

WRITTEN BY KATIE GRANT

The *Bikeriders* is a '60s period feature based on the photography book of the same title that author and photojournalist Danny Lyon compiled in 1963. With Lyon's permission, writer-director Jeff Nichols crafted a fictional story based on the real biker gang, the Chicago Outlaws Motorcycle Club, and the people in their world from 1963 to 1967.

The story Nichols crafted from the real people in the book centers around the club's newest member, Benny, played by Austin Butler, who works his way up the ropes while falling in love with Kathy, played by Jodie Comer. For Kathy, who is not a biker or a club member, it was love at first sight. But she struggles with the violent life Benny is entrenched in, and challenges Benny's loyalty to the club.

The interviews and anecdotes captured in Lyon's book were sprinkled throughout Nichols' script, and Lyon himself is played by Mike Faist in the film.

Producers Sarah Green and Brian Kavanaugh-Jones ensured the cast and crew's safety around the period motorcycles—which sometimes started and sometimes didn't—used in the film while filming the bikers in motion almost exclusively with handheld techniques. On top of the usual anxiety any producer feels on set, Green and Kavanaugh-Jones had to hold their breath many times during filming while the stunt department covered both traditional stunt work and period biking work.

In the end, the producers could breathe

easy. Here, Green and Kavanaugh-Jones talk about how that was no accident.

IF THERE WAS A 'MAKING OF' *THE BIKERIDERS* MOVIE, WHAT WOULD THE FIRST SHOT BE?

Green: For me, it would be Austin Butler riding his motorcycle down a dark road at night far away from us,

then slipping on some wet leaves, dumping the bike, and standing up off it like nothing ever happened, because our stunt guys trained him so well.

IS THAT A METAPHOR FOR HOW THE PRODUCTION WENT?

Kavanaugh-Jones: I think it's a great





Above: Jodie Comer and Austin Butler in director Jeff Nichols' *The Bikeriders*.
Left: Austin Butler as Benny.

metaphor. It was never easy, but it felt like we were pretty blessed throughout. Sarah and I held our breath every day anybody got on a motorcycle without a helmet on because they just didn't wear them (during the time period of the film).

We did huge safety work on it. We were both in constant anxiety, but felt pretty spectacular about how it turned out.

Green: We were confident because we had such extraordinary people doing it. We figured out early on that it couldn't just be one stunt department. It was a twofold stunt department. You had the fighting and traditional stunts, and then you had your period motorcycle riders, who are a whole other breed of stuntmen.

WAS IT HARD TO FIND A PERIOD MOTORCYCLE EXPERT?

Green: He was actually the first one we brought on the team. Jeff Nichols' brother, Ben Nichols, is a musician and rides a motorcycle. His close friend, Jeff Milburn, collects these bikes and does stunt work and coordination.

Ben had 20 of these bikes and knew where all the other ones were in the country. He also knew how to train people. So he worked with Austin Butler.

The two of them spent a lot of time with these period bikes because they're nothing like modern

bikes. They don't have the same safety measures. They don't operate the same way. The clutches are in different places. They're all finicky. Each one has a personality. We had a little chart that Brian put together.

Kavanaugh-Jones: The chart had various numbers ascribed to how easy or impossible each motorcycle was to start.

Green: And whether it was a stay start.

Kavanaugh-Jones: Right, because they needed to stay started. We had long conversations with Milburn, asking, "What happens if this motorcycle doesn't start?" And he would say, "Well, sometimes it just doesn't." There were many moments where we held our breath, hoping that all 10 motorcycles would move at the same time in the same direction.

HOW DID YOU HANDLE THAT STRESS?

Green: One thing we did extensively in preproduction was figure out how best to shoot the motorcycles, both from an aesthetic point of view—what was going to give Jeff the feeling he wanted from these motorcycle rides—and what was going to be safe. What was going to actually be doable? Where could the camera live?



PHOTOS BY KYLE MAPLAN/FOCUS FEATURES



We learned pretty quickly that we wanted the camera to be handheld on a motorcycle. In some cases, we used three-wheeler bikes. We rigged the front of a three-wheeler so that the cameraperson could sit there, hand-holding the camera and facing back toward the actor, so he's shaking the same way the bike and the actors are, and it all feels kinetic, in sync.

Kavanaugh-Jones: Our secret weapon was that Jeff Nichols knows exactly what he wants. He preps to perfection. Without that level of precision, I don't think we could have come close to doing this movie with the level of safety we needed. We planned out the days impeccably, and except for force majeure, we always hit our schedule, which is astounding. This is the same crew we've used for 20+ years. There's no second-guessing this group.

YOU BOTH EARNED THE PRODUCERS MARK FOR *BIKERIDERS*. WAS THE PROCESS SIMILAR TO OTHER PROJECTS FOR WHICH YOU EARNED THE MARK?

Green: Our process is pretty consistent. Brian and I are in constant touch. We're talking, we're texting. Sometimes the way Jeff works is to talk things through, especially when he's writing. He'll call one of us and talk it through. But the minute we hang up the phone, we tell each other, "This is what's new in the script." We have different perspectives because of our backgrounds, but constant communication is how we do it.

HOW DO THOSE DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS HELP YOU WITH YOUR PRODUCING DUTIES ON *BIKERIDERS* AND BEYOND?

Kavanaugh-Jones: I was at CAA in the film finance group. Now I'm a pretty 360-degrees producer. I've gone through all those crucibles of fire and produced these (films) hands-on. Sarah came from a different perspective. I don't think there's anything either of us can't do. That's what makes our collaboration so fruitful and fun. We are deeply involved in every aspect of the movie—from development to production to distribution.

Green: I come from a really scrappy indie background, so I know how to get down to what the priorities are for the director so the production team is focused and spending money in the right places. We run all decisions by one another—Brian, Jeff and myself. When there's a big decision, we never make it by ourselves. We want to make sure we've thought about where the other producers are coming from.

WHAT WAS THE PROCESS OF ADAPTING THE FILM FROM THE PHOTOGRAPHY BOOK?

Kavanaugh-Jones: Jeff handed us the book 15 years ago and said, "I think this would make an amazing movie." We agreed, but then it sat until we had finished *Midnight Special* and were about to go into *Loving*. Right after *Loving* wrapped, Jeff felt ready to do it.



Austin Butler
as Benny and
Tom Hardy as
Johnny in *The
Bikeriders*.

PHOTOS BY KYLE KAPLAN/FOCUS FEATURES

We were talking to a guy at Netflix, Nick Nesbitt. He's a great executive. We mentioned the book, and he flipped out for it and paid for the development of it. It created an opportunity for Jeff to be really excited about taking this thing that he dreamed about forever, and structure and build it as a movie.

In a weird way, even though it's taken 15 years, it was also perfect timing. I don't know if it made sense for us to make it 10 years ago. When we gave Netflix the script, it was pretty clear it was a different kind of movie than they were ready to dive into. So we quickly got it set up with New Regency, working with them on locking the budget and distribution. I did the business side of the deal. We were making it six months later.

Green: I got to know Danny Lyon pretty well because I ended up negotiating directly with him for the book rights. He didn't want to talk to lawyers. He really wanted to keep it with us.

We had our moments where we were best friends and then we had our moments where he would say, "Wait a minute, somebody's taking this the wrong way." And I'd have to explain to him that we are completely transparent.

When I first saw this book years ago, I thought it would be tricky because there's no story in the book. It's a book of

amazing photographs and some snippets of interviews. Jeff was stepping off from these real people. He made up a completely fictional story based on what he imagined could have happened, given the bits and pieces he knew.

We talked a lot about what was appropriate given the real people behind the photographs. We wanted to honor the good, the family and the loyalty without soft-pedaling what was toxic in that world. As he wrote the story, and the more he talked it through, the more I understood it. So I was kind of a sounding board. But I was also learning to understand the story we were telling and why it mattered to me.

The way Jeff works is that one of us will get on the phone with him every week or so and he'll talk us through the story. Each time he tells it there's something new or something he's stuck on that he needs to talk out. We give feedback and he goes back to work, and then we do it again.

In this case, we talked a lot about Benny and who he was, and why Kathy was with him given that he has none of the emotional intelligence that she has. He means it when he says he doesn't want anything from anyone and he doesn't have anything to give them. It brought me back to withholding boyfriends I've had in the past!



B camera operator Kenneth Neil Moore and director Jeff Nichols on the set of *The Bikeriders*.

WAS IT HARD TO MAKE EVERYTHING THAT'S SEEN ON SCREEN, WHETHER COSTUMES OR PROPS, AUTHENTIC TO THE PERIOD?

Green: That's where our crew family comes in. It's not hard for us because we know they're never going to let something go on screen that doesn't feel right, that isn't exactly of that period, and is as well used and as dirty as it would be. By bringing key crew members like them on, we don't have to think twice about it. We just have to make sure they have the resources that they need.

That part took work, as we could easily have spent twice as much to make it look as good as it does. Our team doesn't hold back on what they need, and we don't hold back with what we can provide. Everyone knows that we are robbing Peter to pay Paul, so we collectively work to make sure the money is being spent where it's most needed and contributing most effectively to the whole.

Our first AD, Don Sparks, helped keep us to reasonable days. So our hot cost savings went to the unexpected costs, such as shipments from London after (costume designer) Erin Benach shopped and did fittings there, which were held up for weeks in customs due to COVID. She had to scramble to buy new stock, and the ager/dyer and the rest of the costume

team worked nonstop to make things ready.

Our line producer David Kern and his team were on top of every penny spent so they could reallocate in real time. We knew up front that the stunts and motorcycles were going to be the biggest expense, so we had budgeted that way. We worked closely with New Regency to land on a budget that we could all accept—just enough to accomplish the script and not so much as to increase the risk to an untenable extent.

We fought hard to protect our shooting days, which were crucial to getting the work done well. We had 42, went down to 40, and crawled our way back to 42 with hot cost savings.

But it all starts with hiring the right people. When people came out of lockdown and started making movies, suddenly everyone got busy. You couldn't hire somebody to save your life. We were right in the midst of that. Nobody was available. But the good news was that because we are committed to our family and are loyal to them, they're loyal to us.

So we got the best gaffer. We got the top crew. All these people love Jeff and are loyal to him. They check in with us before they take other jobs. So we were able to have our core team, even in the midst of this incredibly difficult time when they could have been making three times as much somewhere else. I really credit them. It matters to all of us that we do this together.



Jodie Comer, director Jeff Nichols and Austin Butler.



Producer Sarah Green and actor Norman Reedus on the set of *The Bikeriders*.

PHOTOS BY KYLE KAPLAN/FOCUS FEATURES

WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF AS THE PRODUCERS OF THIS FILM?

Green: I'm proud that everyone came out unscathed. All that prep and all that care paid off. It wasn't an accident that there were no accidents other than the one I mentioned earlier. And I'm so proud that when his back tire hit those wet leaves, Austin knew exactly what to do. We had faith in our stunt coordinator, and he had faith in Austin's training and skill. Otherwise he'd never have been freeriding.

It took work to find my way into this very male world. Jeff and I had many conversations about it. His idea that Kathy was going to be our way in led to discussions about her perspective, what about her character was relatable and what might not be—what was just pure, unvarnished Kathy.

Sexism and violence were the reality of that time and place, and Kathy had to find a way to take care of herself and get out. I was so pleased that when Jodie Comer read the script, she loved Kathy and really understood her.

This helped us to create a movie from a woman's perspective of a very male world and still be true to who Kathy was. She was no big feminist. She was the straight talker. She's super honest. So much of that dialogue that Jodie has is straight from the recordings that Danny Lyons

made of her. I love that Kathy was the voice of the film.

Kavanaugh-Jones: I'm really proud of what this movie says about masculinity, both the good and the bad. About brotherhood and the toxicity of those things as they go the wrong way.

We talked about what it is in this space of the '60s biker world and our world right now around that masculine energy—what the best and the worst of that can be, and everything in between. I'm always moved by and ultimately focused on the theme and where that lives in the legacy of each of these films. ■

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