

Stacie Passon

An Intimate Partnership and an Exciting Debut

BY MICHAEL DUNAWAY

Although it's true, it's needlessly reductionist to call Stacie Passon's debut film *Concussion* one of the best lesbian films in recent memory. It's a great film, period. It's a fascinating thought experiment, a beautifully and sensitively rendered character study, a brave exploration of a mysterious world, and the sexiest film of the year by a long shot. All in all, it's one of the most exciting directorial debuts of the year.

It's also a tour de force for its lead actor Robin Weigert (known by many fans from her work in *Angels in America* and *Deadwood*). But Passon didn't write the part of Abby with Weigert, or any other well-known actress, in mind. "I wrote it as an experimental screenwriting project," Passon says. "I wanted to see what boiled up. And I gave it to two friends, and they both went nuts for it. They loved the idea of seeing this lesbian sex worker through a different prism. The project happened very quickly because it wasn't contingent on getting a well-known actor. But they said, if you wanted to shoot for the moon, who would you go for?"

Sometimes the perfect answer comes from an unexpected direction. "I knew I needed someone who would really nail it," Passon remembers, "really disappear into it. Otherwise it would just be a cliché and kind of implode on itself. Robin was my first choice. I didn't even really know her work, but I saw her reel and knew she was exactly what I needed. She was so intelligent and self-possessed, she had such a range, and she had exactly the look that I had envisioned for the part. I kind of totally fell in love with her acting. I met with her and she hesitantly agreed to do the part." There are many reasons for an actor to be hesitant to do a part that requires her to be a lesbian who falls into sex work despite her seemingly stable marriage, but Weigert's hesitation was simpler, and more easily addressed. Despite years of experience in commercial work, Passon had yet to direct a narrative feature. "It was because I was a first-timer," she says. "I mean, even though I probably have more days behind the camera than most people around." She laughs. "Feature film directors only shoot for, like, 30 days a year, or something. And I did a ton more than that, and developed an aesthetic that I thought I could bring to what I was doing. I sat down with her and explained my ideas, and she seemed to go along with it, but because I was a first-timer she didn't have a map."

Once the partnership was cemented, Weigert turned out to be a deep collaborator with Passon in creating the character. "Robin shows you what you write," Passon says, "and makes it better. She was an incredibly self-possessed actor, and she threw herself 100 percent in the role. I don't think she has the capability to do it any other way, frankly. I don't think Robin knows the meaning of the phrase 'phone it in.' She's there body, mind, and soul. I encouraged her to dig deeper, she encouraged me to dig deeper."

As the writer/director, Passon was deeply invested in Abby, with whom she shares some emotional space; Weigert was, if anything, equally committed to the character. "She disappears into every role," Passon says. "That's what she does. Don't print this, but if she was a man, she'd be Robert De Niro by now. Maybe you should print that, actually. It's true. She lost all that weight and gained all that muscle. For three months, she trained twice a day; she was on a 1400-calorie diet. She had no sugar; her carb was an apple. And she didn't only do it because she wanted her body to look good. She wanted to know what these hyper-vigilant, exercise-obsessed housewives felt like, that they felt vacuous and flatlined. They starved the hunger out of themselves. And that was just genius to me."

That manic obsession with control springs from a deep place in Abby's psyche. "I knew she couldn't complain," says Passon. "The minute she complains is the minute her wife will shut her up. She doesn't complain during the entire piece. She doesn't make one peep. The key to her is her silence. She knows that she needs to compartmentalize this aspect of her life, but then it turns on her, because it ends up being all about hunger and longing and intimacy. That's all unleashed in her, and she goes from this stone-like woman who doesn't have anything to say, to this animal. But she does it in this kind way; she never loses her temperament in it. I loved that about her. It was like a woman who was giving birth without screaming."

Without giving away the ending of the film, there's a bit of a *Wizard of Oz* quality to it—you know that Dorothy going home is the "right" thing to do, but you can't help but wonder if Oz wasn't maybe a better place for her. But Passon sees a productive resolution in the return at the end of *Concussion*. "I think there's a way," she says, "as she sits on that stationary bike, of moving in place. You can stay in place, but shift. And she's moved in place; her entire worldview has shifted. She's sitting in the front; she even looks at us. At the beginning, that first spin class scene, she's not even in that scene, as far as we can see."

And then, off the cuff, she drops the bomb that makes us see not only *Concussion* differently, but maybe even *The Wizard of Oz*, too: "There's no place like home," she suggests, "except when you've gone to Oz, and you can bring it back home."

Not bad.