



*CIGARETTE CANDY* was an Official Selection of the 2009 24fps International Short Film Festival. The project received the fest's Red Citation Humanitarian Award, presented to the filmmaker whose work focuses on global issues of tolerance, justice, and social commentary. The film went on to become the breakout short of the 2010 SXSW Film Festival in Austin, Texas, winning the award for Best Narrative Short. Shortly after SXSW, Actor Johnny Orsini received the Florida Film Festival Special Jury Award for Outstanding Performance for his work on the film. The following is an interview with director Lauren Wolkstein, with assistance from her collaborators Johnny Orsini (lead actor) and Jeff Sousa (writer).

## The Private War

*An interview with Lauren Wolkstein*

*Director of CIGARETTE CANDY*



The power of film lies in its ability to capture, forever, moments of unblinking truth. There are moments in film that capture this truth so quietly, and so concisely, that the shock of recognition causes a shift in our perspective. The power of seeing this truth is that in its revelation, hearts and minds are altered.

At the end of her short film *CIGARETTE CANDY*, director Lauren Wolkstein challenges us with one of those revelatory moments. It is a simple stroke, quiet and choked. A young Marine, traumatized by images of violence he cannot escape, sits on a bed next to a troubled teenaged girl. Neither speaks. But in that

austere moment, Wolkstein and her actors open the wounds of war, revealing the damaged boy inside the hero.

I spoke with Lauren about *CIGARETTE CANDY*, her politics, the art of collaboration, and the creative process.

**Barry Smoot [24fps]:** It was not surprising to learn that you are from a military family.



**Lauren Wolkstein [LW]:** I am. I was born in Baltimore, Maryland and grew up in a small suburban town called Ellicott City, right outside of Baltimore. My mother is a schoolteacher and my father is a nurse in the Air Force with the rank of Colonel.

**24fps:** In fact, I have some clandestine information that you got your first job in high school working for the Department of Defense.

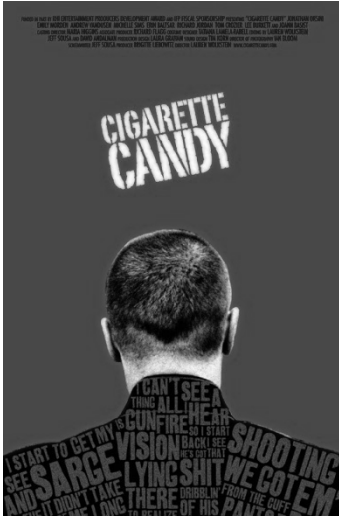
**LW:** Yes, I got my first job as a computer analytic aide at Fort Meade, Maryland.

**24fps:** What did your job entail?

**LW:** I can't really talk about that. It's still pretty surreal. I was in high school and I knew computer programming, so I was recruited to work for the government.

**24fps:** That's very covert.

**LW:** I thought it would be my career, but quickly learned that I didn't want to do what I was doing. I was forced to play the role of an adult a lot earlier than most people my age.



**24fps:** Did this experience help define the perspective of CIGARETTE CANDY?

**LW:** I was only 16 or 17 years old and had a security clearance. Most of my friends were out at the beach and playing sports and I was coding for the government. This theme of “kids being forced into adulthood” seems to be in all of my work.

**24fps:** Explain the jump from the Department of Defense to film school.

**LW:** I wanted to be more creative and expressive, and I have always loved movies, so that was the medium I was most drawn to. I enrolled in Duke University and studied both computer science and film. That led me to the MFA program in Film Directing at Columbia.

**24fps:** Why did you choose that particular program?

**LW:** There is no better school for learning how to write scripts and tell great stories. At Columbia I have been fortunate enough to learn from some of my favorite filmmakers working today: Tom Kalin, Eric Mendelsohn, and Katherine Dieckmann. They are all ground breaking artists, extremely supportive mentors, and they have stayed true to their voices.

**24fps:** You also did a stint as an intern with producer Chris Hanley (*The Virgin Suicides*, *Buffalo '66*, *American Psycho*) in Los Angeles. How was that experience?

**LW:** Chris is a really brilliant man. I sat in on budget and script development meetings he had with directors, and was able to observe the process of creating films from development to post production. It was the best experience I have had in the film industry so far.



**24fps:** I understand you both share a love for Paul Morrissey and Andy Warhol movies.

**LW:** My final paper for my undergrad film class at Duke in Los Angeles was about high art versus low art in Paul Morrissey's genre films like *Blood for Dracula*, and Chris came to my presentation to share his own Warhol stories and critique my paper. It was a really memorable experience.

**24fps:** During my research work for this interview I asked you to list some modern directors you felt had inspired your decision to move into filmmaking. The list was really diverse.

**LW:** There are so many talented artists I respect, ranging from Ingmar Bergman to John Waters.

**24fps:** That's quite a contrast.



**LW:** Yes. Bergman I admire for his understanding and communicating the human condition better than any other filmmaker. His intimate compositions are brilliant.

**24fps:** The Waters nod is not surprising, you being a Baltimore native.

**LW:** John Waters is the pope of trash, and he makes me happy. "Cry Baby" was basically filmed in my back yard.

**24fps:** I know that you have huge admiration for

Lodge Kerrigan (*Clean, Shaven, Claire Dolan, Keane*).

**LW:** Kerrigan is masterful at getting inside a character's darkest thoughts and showing the audience how his characters see the world.

**24fps:** He's been described as "raw" and "savage."

**LW:** You have to be as brave as Lodge Kerrigan to tell truthful stories. Otherwise, why tell them in the first place?

**24fps:** I agree. *Clean, Shaven* is fantastically brave and emotionally detailed. I felt the same way about your film, *CIGARETTE CANDY*. How difficult is it to create such strong emotional rhythms in the short film format?

**LW:** Well thanks so much! It's extremely difficult to create strong emotional moments in a short film because you have to make your audience empathize with your characters in only 15-20 minutes.

**24fps:** As the chair of the selection committee for our festival, I see hundreds of short films every year. If I could name one consistent criticism, it is that so many young artists want to squeeze too much plot and emotional information into such a difficult and concise format.



**LW:** It is extremely important to concentrate on one precise emotional moment in a short film. In *CIGARETTE CANDY* we focused on the moment where the lead character, Eddie, finally tells the truth and sheds his exterior for the first time. Sticking to that one moment and that one final climactic stance made every scene leading up to that much more powerful.

**24fps:** Can you tell me about your inspiration for the film?



**LW:** I've wanted to tell the story of family members being affected by a loved one coming home from war for a long time. I was originally inspired by Sally Mann's photo "Candy Cigarette," which showed a young girl, overtly sexualized for her age, smoking what appears to be a cigarette. She made me think of all the young men and women going off to war and having to act the part of the grown up long before they are actually grown men and women.

**24fps:** This must be very personal for you, given your father's profession and military experience.

**LW:** I have seen my father come home time and time again from serving overseas. My father was in charge of several teenage airmen when he served in Iraq. He witnessed firsthand how war not only affects the soldier, but the man inside the uniform. The stories my father recounts are not traditional "war stories" of explosions and combat, but rather stories of disembodiment, disengagement, and isolation.

**24fps:** I know that another huge inspiration for your film was the picture of James Blake Miller taken by LA Times photographer Luis Sinco, titled "The Marlboro Marine." It's widely known that James has suffered severely from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after his harrowing experiences in Fallujah. His family and his life have never been the same.



**LW:** My father has seen this happen firsthand, and I'm still coming to terms with seeing how this emotionally impacts him. I don't know if I will ever be over it. I think that is why I am so attracted to this subject matter. I have to express my personal experiences through my films. It's the best way I know to talk about it, and I think it is my responsibility to show this to a wider audience.



**Jeff Sousa (screenwriter) [JS]:** I have always wanted to do a project relating to the Iraq war purely out of a political consciousness. Because of Lauren's relationship with her dad and his experiences, I knew she would treat the subject matter with the appropriate humility and authenticity.

**24fps:** Your film is not about war, but about what happens when we live through it. A vast number of men and women serving in our modern military are teenagers. Are we asking too much of them too soon?

**LW:** I don't know the answer to that question, but I do know that it is extremely hard to transition from a child to an adult, and people in the armed forces are forced to make that transition way too soon.

**24fps:** I think this is the essence of your film. You have told me that growing up in a military family hasn't impacted your politics, but I am curious if you feel comfortable enough to express your opinion about the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**LW:** I hope this film isn't seen as some sort of political statement, but rather a story about the human condition pushed to its most extreme. Choose any war. It's all the same. War destroys people. That is a fact.

**JS:** The film is not pro-war or anti-war in a global sense. We wanted to tell the story of one specific Marine at his homecoming party. Our goal was to create empathy and increased understanding for his situation.



**Johnny Orsini (lead actor) [JO]:** When I was first researching the role of Eddie I was appalled at the suicide rate of returning Veterans. PTSD is such a complicated, under-researched and misunderstood issue.

**24fps:** Johnny, your performance in the film is heartbreaking. Personally, I felt it was the most outstanding work by an actor in any film we screened in our public exhibitions last fall.

**LW:** Johnny is a brilliant actor.

**24fps:** Lauren, how did you arrive at casting him?



**LW:** Through Facebook! Usually, I would be freaked out by strangers contacting me on Facebook wanting to audition for a film role, but Johnny was super sweet, professional, and gave me a link to a monologue.

**JO:** I just moved to NYC and heard about the project and was completely drawn to it. I didn't even have an agent yet. I recorded the monologue with a friend and then sent Lauren the link begging her to watch it and see me for an audition.

**LW:** The monologue was amazing. There was no other option for Eddie.

**24fps:** The film has a raw impact that is difficult for some people to watch. You obviously have such a keen eye for this detail and how to communicate this to your actors. Can you talk about your directorial process?

**LW:** I like to be very close to my actors. It is all about trust. As a director, you have to be willing to make yourself vulnerable and open. That is key to building a trusting relationship.

**24fps:** The camera in the film is voyeuristic. It places the viewer in the middle of some very uncomfortable emotional and physical moments. Can you talk a bit about the camera, and how you use it to communicate?

**LW:** The camera is the narrator. The camera is



Eddie's eyes. I love subjective camera moves and moments. I love experiencing a film through the eyes of the main character. I wanted people to experience Eddie's claustrophobia, his disassociation from this environment, and his longing for Candy and escape. That is the power of the camera and the versatility you have with moving images.

**24fps:** I have always believed that film captures the truth inside the pretense. After we initially spoke, I took another look at Sally Mann's photo "Candy Cigarette" that you cited as inspiration. What strikes me about the photo is that the child's focus seems to be past the eyes of the photographer, somewhere behind the camera.

**LW:** Yes, like she is aware of some power or influence outside the artist's frame.

**24fps:** Exactly. No matter how diligently we pursue the challenge of creating a character, the camera captures the essence of the performer, and exposes the emotional truth. Great directors know this, and their challenge is to encourage the actor to open themselves up to that scrutiny.



**LW:** This is why I love working with actors. Building a character with an actor and then seeing the actor begin to embody that vision is so rewarding. Finding both Johnny and Emily Morden (Candy) and working with them to expose that truth was the best thing I could bring to the audience.

**JO:** Lauren is a great director because she's so intuitive and trusting. She was right there when I needed her and she knew when to give me space.

**24fps:** Jeff, you received our fest's Best Screenplay

Award for your unflinching work. How did you two come to work on this project?

**JS:** Lauren and I met during our first year in film school, although we really didn't start working together until the summer of 2007.

**LW:** We really connected on a writing retreat we took up in Maine with our Columbia University professor Lewis Cole. Lewis passed away recently and this film is dedicated to him. Jeff listened to my personal experiences and brought some amazing ideas to the table.

**JS:** Lauren's initial pitch for the film was about a traumatized Marine who, coming home, encounters a young girl who he relates to more than his family. By the end of the story, you're left wondering if that girl is actually part of his imagination. In the end, we decided to make the girl real.

**24fps:** Eddie's climactic monologue is really compelling. Was his trauma based on an actual event?



**LW:** In a way, yes. When we put up the casting call for the film online a young man named Eddie Van Buren (who has our fictional character's name) contacted us and said that he was not an actor, but rather a soldier in the Army who was currently serving in Iraq.



**24fps:** That's uncanny.

**LW:** He was googling his name in order to find articles about himself from when he played ball in college, and stumbled across our casting call with his actual name. He has stayed in touch with us and we became close friends during the process. The monologue Jeff wrote was informed by this Eddie's own true story.

**24fps:** Where is he now?

**LW:** He is back home and out of harm's way. His war stories are a true testament to the importance of what we wanted to say with our work. We also dedicated the film to one of his friends who died in Iraq.

**24fps:** In the introduction to this interview I mentioned the final shot of the film, citing it as one of those perfectly modulated moments that has the power to alter hearts and minds. The camera slowly leaves the two young leads sitting alone on the bed. We see them both for who they are—two kids forced to act as adults long before they should.

**LW:** Warfare is not just emotional—it's psychological, emotional, and visceral. We need to have a creative outlet for servicemen and family members to express their feelings about their experiences dealing with deployment.

**24fps:** A recent wide-ranging Department of Defense survey revealed the rate of service men attempting suicide has doubled in recent years, coinciding with an increase in those reporting symptoms of PTSD and those abusing prescription drugs. Why do you think these numbers are so staggering?

**LW:** Coming back from war is incredibly difficult. The real solution to these problems is not to create them in the first place. As Americans, we owe tremendous thanks to the Fisher House™ Foundation, the VA, the Wounded Warrior Project, and other organizations devoted to the recovery process.

**JO:** We all ask ourselves the question "how could someone fight in the war, and then after surviving everything they are put through, finally make it back home just to take their own life?" It's heartbreaking.



**JS:** I'm not sure why these problems seem more prevalent now than in previous wars. It could be that they're not. It could be that people are just more aware of the psychological impact and now we talk about it more. In any case, I think raising awareness is essential.

**LW:** The fact that men and women go back five or six times to the same situation only magnifies the problem. These are extreme emotional scars.

**24fps:** I understand you are developing the short into a feature length film.



**LW:** The feature starts where the short left off. It is about a newly-wed Marine who seeks atonement by becoming caretaker to the Sergeant he accidentally wounded in battle, but falls into an adrenaline-infused affair with the man's rebellious and seductive teenage daughter.

**24fps:** Has the exposure and critical praise you have received from the short helped fuel interest in the feature project?

**JO:** It's a collaborative process and we've been lucky to receive some very positive attention. A

feature film would help us bring this important story to a larger audience.

**24fps:** Lauren, any final thoughts?

**LW:** I never set out to make a film about the war or about the troops. I wanted to express my feelings about a teenager being destroyed by a traumatic situation. I hope my film is seen as a story about the human condition pushed to its most extreme, and that it helps focus attention on the difficulties our young service men and women face everyday. I also hope it brings some light to those who feel that they are fighting their battles alone. They are not. We are all in this together.



**LW** is Lauren Wolkstein (director). Lauren was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, by her mother, a school teacher, and her father, a colonel in the Air Force. She received her B.A. in computer science from Duke University, and subsequently went on to serve as an assistant to Chris Hanley at Muse Productions in Los Angeles. She just graduated from Columbia University's School of the Arts, with an M.F.A. in Film Directing. At Columbia, she received the Lifetime Movie Network Student Filmmaker Award for her short film "We Three." Lauren is currently developing and writing feature films with Jeff Sousa.



**JO** is Johnny Orsini (lead actor). Johnny can be seen in the upcoming feature film "Rocksteady." Theatre credits include *The Little Dog Laughed* (Hartford Theatre Works) and *After Ashley* (IRNE nominated Best Actor.) Training: T. Schreiber Studio.



**JS** is Jeff Sousa (writer). Jeff is a native of Massachusetts. He spent a year abroad in Spain during high school, and then went on to study philosophy at the University of Chicago. He's worked as a translator, interpreter, and elementary school teacher in rural Japan where his short "Souseki's Third Dream" won Best Film at the Aomori Independent Film Festival. Jeff just graduated from Columbia University's School of the Arts with his award-winning thesis film "The Hirosaki Players" and currently resides in Brooklyn.



**24fps** is Barry Smoot. Barry is the Artistic Director of the landmark Paramount Theatre in Abilene, Texas, and the Director of the 24fps International Short Film Festival.

PHOTO CREDITS:

Ms. Wolkstein's portrait by Carmen Jimenez. Production photographs from CIGARETTE CANDY by Stevan Lee Mraovitch. "Candy Cigarette" photo by Sally Mann from her collection. "Marlboro Marine" photograph by James Blake Miller for the Los Angeles Times.

LINKS:

CIGARETTE CANDY Official Website: <http://www.cigarettecandy.com>

CIGARETTE CANDY on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/cigarettecandy>

24fps Festival Website: <http://www.24fpsfest.com>

24fps On Facebook: <http://facebook.com/24fpsfest>

Landmark Paramount Theatre Website: <http://www.paramount-abilene.org>

The Fisher House™ Foundation: <http://www.fisherhouse.org>

The Wounded Warrior Project: <http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org>

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs: <http://www.va.gov>