

RECORD REVIEW

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Joe Berlinger, left, with Zac Efron, who plays Ted Bundy in Mr. Berlinger's new film.

Filmmaker's twist on story of a serial killer

by Abby Luby

Riveting accounts of serial killer Ted Bundy are at the epicenter of America's obsession with true crime entertainment. Leading up to his execution in 1989 and long after, the life and heinous crimes of the notorious murderer found their way to novels, documentaries and films, sating the public's growing appetite to see real villains.

Today, crime entertainment popularity is at a peak. The soon to be released "Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile," by Katonah resident Joe Berlinger, an Emmy-winning and Academy Award nominated filmmaker and producer, delves deep into Mr. Bundy's psychopathy and his charm-laced persona that enabled him to deceive friends, family and the criminal justice system for years.

The film, which premiered at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival to rave reviews, has a limited, Academy Awards qualifying run in New York City and Los Angeles California, before released on Netflix. But Westchester residents can see the film at the Bedford Playhouse May 4 – 9. The Playhouse will host a Q&A with Mr. Berlinger

after the 7 p.m. screening Saturday, May 4. Mr. Berlinger will also appear at the Jacob Burns Film Center on Sunday, May 5 at noon, for another post-film Q&A.

“Bundy has always been a source of fascination for me because the lessons of Bundy can’t be overstated,” Mr. Berlinger said in an interview. “We want to think that a serial killer exists on some different, isolated spectrum of human behavior, someone who is creepy-strange and a bizarre-looking social outcast who doesn’t fit in with society. It’s comforting to think that they’re easily identifiable and we can avoid them. But the reality is, especially with somebody like Bundy, those who do the worst are the people you least expect and the ones you most often trust, whether it’s a priest who commits pedophilia and holds mass the next day or someone like Michael Jackson.”

For the last 25 years, Mr. Berlinger has produced and directed award winning social issue documentaries, so “Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile” is something of a departure for him. “Brother’s Keeper,” told the story of a 1990 death in upstate New York where the eldest of a family of four brothers was found dead in his home, and a brother was accused of suffocating him. “Crude,” examined the issue of oil pollution in the Amazon rainforest. It won 22 awards and triggered a high-profile First Amendment battle with oil-giant Chevron. “Whitey: United States of America v. James J. Bulger” was a feature-length documentary about the notorious crime boss Whitey Bluger’s sensational trial that explored allegations of corruption within the highest levels of law enforcement.

Mr. Berlinger easily segued to the narrative feature film format because he had just produced the four-part Netflix docuseries hit “Conversations With a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes,” based on hundreds of hours of death-row interviews with Mr. Bundy prior to his execution.

“Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile” portrays the life of Ted Bundy seen through the eyes of his long-time girlfriend Liz Kloepfer, who refused to believe he was a killer. The screenplay, written by Michael Werwie about six years ago, was based on Ms. Kloepfer’s 1981 memoir “The Phantom Prince: My Life With Ted Bundy.

“For years Werwie’s script had been on the Hollywood Black List — a list of scripts that are really liked but have problems getting produced,” said Mr. Belinger. “I read the script and was immediately captivated. I loved the point of view.”

The cast includes Mr. Efron as Ted Bundy, Lily Collins as Ms. Kloepfer, John Malkovich as Edward Cowart, the judge who presided over Bundy’s trial and Jim Parsons (best known for his role as Sheldon Cooper in “The Big Bang Theory”) as the Florida prosecutor Larry Simpson.

Mr. Berlinger said Zac Efron’s real-life persona as a charmer, a heart throb and charismatic guy made him perfect for the part. “Zac gave me an exciting element of reality that let me use my documentary reality chops for this scripted movie.”

A strong, credible love relationship between Ted and Liz was crucial to the story line, the director noted. “The strength in portraying their relationship allows the audience to take the same journey that the character of Liz does,” explained Mr. Berlinger. “That these characters really love each other needed to burn off the screen.”

Performances by Mr. Parsons and Mr. Malkovich portray criminal justice system stalwarts that feed a nuanced satire. “A big chunk of the movie is the Florida trial where Bundy was allowed to represent himself and in so doing, made a mockery of the justice system,” Mr. Berlinger said. “There were moments where Bundy was allowed to cross examine victims and crime scene people, and the judge allowed Bundy to give, what was in essence, a performance.”

Despite financial constrains (the film was produced on a modest \$8 million budget), Mr. Berlinger said he was able to attract major Hollywood talent who worked at a fraction of their usual salaries. “All the actors wanted to do it — it wasn’t just a job for them, they felt the script was special.”

Most challenging was the limited, 28-day shoot in the dead of winter in Northern Newport, a town located directly across the Ohio River from Cincinnati, Ohio. The location was chosen to take advantage of the state's favorable film tax credit, which attracts many low-budget film productions.

"Kentucky presented logistical problems because they don't have a big film infrastructure," said Mr. Berlinger. "And the story doesn't take place in Kentucky — it takes place in the Pacific Northwest, Florida, Colorado and Utah — but we made it work."

Mr. Berlinger didn't want to create a typical movie about a serial killer interspersed with sequential scenes of violence until the killer was caught. "This screenplay had a whole different perspective. There is very little violence in the movie because you're seeing the action through Ted Bundy's girlfriend," said Mr. Berlinger. "If I made a movie that was full of violent images, it would have robbed the movie's ending of its meaning." Instead, he said, the film aims to draw the into Ms. Kloepfer's belief, nearly to the end, that Mr. Bundy was innocent.

"I want the audience to almost root for him, because you think he's going to get back with Liz. But the moment Liz realizes that Bundy did brutally kill over 30 women, I want the audience to feel right along with Liz— that they are as disgusted as she was, that they can't believe they even liked Bundy."

"Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile" makes a striking statement about the genesis of Americans' obsession with crime entertainment. Before the Bundy trial, news coverage used 16-millimeter film, which took hours to develop prior to broadcasting on television. But then, the use of video tape, and, later, satellite technology, enabled the sensational coverage of the Bundy trial in real time. "The growing fascination with Bundy prior to the Florida trial had made him a legend and that kind of popularity intersected with the new technology," said Mr. Berlinger.

Right before the Bundy trial in 1979, the Florida Supreme Court ruled that cameras were allowed in the courtroom. "It was the first time in the history of America that a murder trial was covered live, gavel to gavel. Americans, for the first time ever, got to sit in their living rooms and watch a serial murderer as live entertainment," said Mr. Berlinger.

"Just a few years later in 1995 was the O.J. Simpson trial, and by then you had the 24-hour news cycle, multiple cable stations and real crime again became live entertainment. Trace it all back to Bundy."

Mr. Bundy's case might be unfamiliar to millennials, but his story still strongly resonates. "We live in an era of internet 'catfishing' where people pretend to be one thing and they're another. People live their lives on social media where they can curate who they are. Sometimes you never really know who you are dealing with," said Mr. Berlinger.