

Jan & Rich chat with Larysa Kondracki
director & co-screenwriter (with Eilis Kirwan) of
THE WHISTLEBLOWER starring Rachel Weisz.



Larysa Kondracki at Whistler Film Festival
in British Columbia (12/5/10).
Photo Credit: Heinz Ruckemann/UPI/NewsCom.

FF2 NOTE: This interview was conducted at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema in Lincoln Park immediately after a “Word of Mouth” screening sponsored by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

Jan: So how did you first come upon this story, Larysa? How did you first find out about Kathryn “Kathy” Bolkovac?

Larysa: I'm Ukrainian/Canadian and people in my community were talking about the issue of sex trafficking. The phrase wasn't really that well used, it was just “something was happening to these girls.” And then I read about it, just more out of interest, and it was upsetting, obviously.

And then I thought: Well maybe there's a film in this? But I took it to the person who has ended up being the producer on **THE WHISTLEBLOWER**, Christina Piovesan, and she said: "Nobody is going to want to watch two hours of this. There's no way in." And I said, "Okay, well, maybe not..."

But I kept reading, just because I was interested, and then I found Kathy's story, and it's a John Grisham novel: UN, State Department, cover-ups, files stolen, phones bugged! I just couldn't believe it hadn't been made into a movie.

Jan: The scary part, to me, is that I—me—a feminist activist for my entire adult life, an original subscriber to *Ms. Magazine* in 1972 and doing our WITASWAN project almost ten years now... I had never heard about any of this before.

Larysa: Yeah. Most people didn't know...

Jan: So, I'm an NPR junkie...

Larysa: Yep.

Jan: ...and Saturday morning I heard an interview...

Larysa: Hers?

Jan: I was half asleep, but it was Kathy, yes, an interview...

Larysa: She did *Weekend Edition*; I did the *Tell Me More* that came out today.

Jan: Right, it was *Weekend Edition* last weekend. I was listening, and that's when I first heard Kathy's story.

Larysa: When you go home tonight, Google it. It was all over the European press...

Jan: Last weekend, really, I was half asleep, but for 2 hours tonight, Larysa, you had me on the edge of my seat.

I was a consultant for almost 20 years at some very big firms—Coopers & Lybrand which is now PriceWaterhouseCoopers, and Peat Marwick Mitchell which is now KPMG—so I've been in many “power situations” where “alpha males” tried to intimidate me, and you really got it.

Larysa: Yeah, my favorite scene is the one with the guy from Human Resources...

Jan: Exactly!

Larysa: And that's almost word-for-word what happened. It happened over several different incidents, but I remember that when I read a transcription, he said: "Maybe you should take a vacation, take some time off? Why don't you go and explore Europe with your daughter? Your job will be here when you get back." And it was just the creepiest thing to me.

Richard: Well, it showed a lot of personal knowledge [of Kathy's life] based on previous investigation.

Jan: Okay, so just so you know, Larysa, Richard is the VP Finance at University Chicago Medical Center now, but in one of his prior incarnations, he was UCMC's

Director of Internal Audit. So he actually has a lot of investigative experience and personal knowledge of some whistleblower situations.

Larysa: Wow.

Richard: One of the things that people say about whistleblowers is that they're people that don't fit in with the rest of the organization. They come in from the outside without always knowing what they're getting into, and I thought that was brought out very well in your film.

Larysa: Kathy was once just “one of the guys,” and there's that scene where she says: “Back home, we just had each other's back.”

She thought she was joining this taskforce. And when she got there, she met Jan Van Der Velde [played by Nikolaj Lie Kaas], and she had a great time.

Kathy is a real “guy's gal.” She's from Nebraska; she can drink a beer. And she was also very good looking, so obviously the guys really liked her.

Then suddenly, once she started getting into this investigation, she would be sitting alone in the cafeteria and they would ostracize her, and it was very obvious to see that transition. She's not a nerdy tattletale; she's a really down-to-earth, interesting person. But suddenly, Kathy became persona non grata.

Richard: But calling off the internal investigators, is something that actually happened?

Larysa: Well the David Strathairn character, “Peter Ward,” he's probably the most kind of composited of everyone. Kathy did, at one point, start to hand files into Internal Affairs because her direct superiors just didn't care. And then she was told by people in Internal Affairs: “Hey, high ranking guys are just walking in and taking out the files...”

So “the David Strathairn character” is sort of a bunch of characters, and once those files started disappearing, then Kathy started to photocopy things to create a sort of backup system, and I think that's when she started to realize: I might have to become a whistleblower.

Jan: Did you ever see the Lukas Moodysson film **LILYA 4-EVER**?

Larysa: Oh, yes; it's a beautiful film, yes! Moodysson got in there really, really early. He's a fantastic filmmaker, but I think that **LILYA 4-EVER** came out before people knew what the phrase “sex trafficking” meant...

Jan: Right, so your strategy → to draw attention to this issue of “sex trafficking,” you said in the Q&A: “I made a thriller with a hot actress.”

Larysa: Right. Rachel happens to be “hot,” but Kathy was a good looking woman, so it's true. But, my intention was to create a thriller rather than a drama [like Moodysson did] or a documentary. **SILENCE OF THE LAMBS** was a really big inspiration; also **SILKWOOD**.

Jan: Exactly, because in comparing the two, I'm really saying Richard and I may be among the half dozen people in all of Chicago who actually saw **LILYA 4-EVER**. So clearly its artistic excellence (being nominated for an Independent Spirit Award, etc, etc), did it no good at all here in the USA.

Now your strategy to make a good film, but make it in a thriller format, leads you smack into this issue of “gratuitous violence.” How did you decide, artistically, where the line is?

Larysa: You don't make a film like this without being realistic, and the fact of the matter is the violence involved is horrific. It's ritualistic and it's not motivated by anything other than business.

These girls are simply a commodity. It's like the traffickers are packaging meat. They're on a factory line. The traffickers themselves get no pleasure.

I actually made a short film from point of view of a 17-year-old boy who is sort of in denial about the fact that he's a driver for these traffickers. It's about the night that one guy doesn't show up and he has to become a part of this gang rape and he's horrified. But by the end, well, it cuts to him a few months later and he's just numb.

In some of the reviews we've gotten, they say that **THE WHISTLEBLOWER** is too black and white, and it's just evil, and this and that. But I don't see it as a black and white thing: there are good women and bad men, and good men and bad women, and we did that on purpose because it isn't so black and white.

In terms of the violence, I read a brilliant interview with the Coen Brothers: when they were doing **NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN**, they said that a lot of times in films people don't really portray how exhausting it is to be violent.

So, when you really start to think about it, you go: Well, what would it take to hold a girl down and to do that to her? And again, I didn't want to go into “torture porn” or sensationalize it, but I wanted you to be able to spend enough time “there” to really understand what they go through.

The guys doing it are so cold about it. They're not getting any pleasure out of it. It's not sexual, it's just—what's the academic phrase?—it's a process of desensitization.

So, yeah, we have those scenes, but we tested it to make sure because the last thing I wanted to do was repulse people or deter people from seeing the film. In Toronto [at the TIFF premiere] one scene was 45 seconds longer, and somebody fainted or something and that was a concern for me. So I think we reached the point where it's effective and not over the top.

Richard: I thought the first scene in the bar—where Kathy is walking in and just looking at the surroundings and imagining what must have been going on—that scene reminded me of the scene in **AMISTAD** where they walked into the slave ship, and I thought that worked beautifully.

Larysa: Yeah, well, when we showed it in Toronto, we hadn't done the sound mix yet, so we hadn't actually "locked" the picture. So it was a huge test audience, and you learn from it. I think that part of the process is to satisfy the audience—without being creepy or cheesy—and to satisfy the audience, you do have to figure out what an audience is going to handle because I want to reach as many people as possible.

Jan: Right, so last question: You set your story up at the start with two instances of domestic violence. The Muslim woman in Bosnia has clearly been abused, and in the Ukrainian scenes, you imply that one woman is being beaten by her husband. And although Kathy herself is not a victim of physical violence, you suggest that she is a victim of her husband's ability to manipulate the legal system...

Larysa: Kathy got screwed by the system, yeah.

Jan: So your thriller about sex-trafficking is deliberately set within a general context of violence against women?

Larysa: That was the material we were handed. Kathy, when she was a police officer in Nebraska, Kathy had worked in sex crimes, so she had a lot of experience with that. So I suppose that's just, that's the position she was put in, and that was her reaction to what she saw.

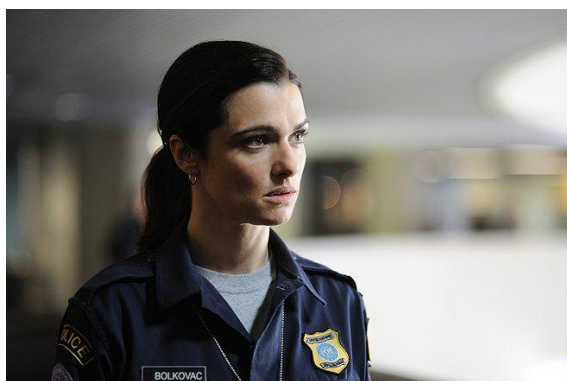
So it wasn't as deliberate as you point out, but maybe, in a way, it's so obvious that I didn't even have to be deliberate about it.

Jan: Obvious to you, Larysa! And strategically brilliant in terms of the way you crafted your screenplay.

Larysa: Okay, I'll take credit for it then 😊

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August 8th interview conducted by Jan Huttner & Rich Miller,
then condensed & edited for posting by Jan.



Kathryn Bolkovac at Toronto International FF (9/13/10).
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Photos of Rachel Weisz as Kathy in **THE WHISTLEBLOWER**
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