

MPTD Interviews Claudia Myers

Leslie Green: Welcome to "Reel Talk with Film DC." This is your host, Leslie Green, director of communications for the DC Office of Motion Picture and Television Development, also known as the DC Film Office.

Today we have Claudia Myers, esteemed filmmaker and director of the new film, "Fort Bliss," starring Michelle Monaghan.

Claudia Myers is an award winning filmmaker who wrote and directed the film, "Kettle of Fish," and award winning comedy, "Below the Beltway." Claudia also happens to be one of our esteemed filmmakers of the month. We're so excited to have you here today. Thank you for joining us.

Claudia Myers: Thank you for having me.

Leslie: Absolutely. Let's start off by talking about the film that's going to be premiering this weekend at the GI Film Festival, "Fort Bliss." Can you tell us a little bit about that film?

Claudia: Absolutely. "Fort Bliss" is about a female army medic, played by Michelle Monaghan, who returns from an extended tour in Afghanistan and finds that she has to rebuild her relationship with her five year old son.

Leslie: I actually had an opportunity to view the film on Friday and it was amazing. It's probably one of the best films I've seen in a very, very long time. It was very gripping. I thought the casting was excellent and the directing was excellent, as well. I loved everything about it.

What made you decide to do this film? Was it a topic that you've always been passionate about or did someone bring it to you and say, "I've got to do that film."

Claudia: The genesis of "Fort Bliss" is interesting because it started when I was working on an army training film that I filmed at the real Fort Bliss near El Paso, Texas. In the course of researching this project, which was about leadership, when I was working with the a company called Will Interactive I had the opportunity to speak with several soldiers about their experience.

One of them was actually a single father. He was an infantry soldier, a single father, and just this idea that he had been on two tours to Iraq. I was curious about what he had done with his son while he was gone. He said he had to leave him with the neighbors.

As a parent myself, it made a big impact on me. I remember thinking, "That's a side of the war I've never thought about." I became really interested in stories of parents who were also soldiers and the particular burden that they must feel and also the pressure that's on the family and that experience and that side of the conflict.

I started to write this story. I always knew it would be about a female soldier because I was especially interested in the extreme working mother story element. That's how "Fort Bliss" evolved into the feature that it is.

Leslie: Wow, so you wrote the film and then you also directed it. Can you take us through your role as a director of a film like this, what your day looks like?

Claudia: A lot of directing is in the preparation. So much of the work happens before you get to set. I spend a good amount of time...Of course, I was also one of the producers on the film. I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how was I going to get the movie made? How was I going to get it financed?

Among the elements that I put together was, of course, a business plan with my producing partner, Adam Silver. But also a look book, which is something that many directors do which is to come up with a document that illustrates how you're going to aesthetically and artistically approach the subject matter. What is it going to look like? What is the camera movement going to be? What is the color palette going to be? What are the themes of the film and how are they going to be visually expressed?

And so, I created that kind of a document. I prepared all the scenes. I looked at every scene individually. What did it need to accomplish? What was the arc for each character? There's so much preparation that goes into the film so that when you get to set, and ideally you've cast the film and you've found your locations and you've worked out all the logistics.

That's a whole other direction of directing but a lot of it happens, really, privately and in a very solitary manner so it's kind of interesting.

Leslie: How did you get your start in the industry? Did you always know you wanted to be a filmmaker as you were growing up?

Claudia: No. I always knew I wanted to tell stories. I actually was interested in being a writer. When I went to college I was a comparative literature major. After that I thought I was interested in becoming a lawyer but working at a law firm took care of that. I was a paralegal and it was just very different than what I had imagined.

I actually changed jobs and started working for a film production company. Working, among other projects, on "The Thin Red Line" with Terrence Malick. A World War II film, the "The Thin Red Line." I fell in love with the process. That particular script was just tremendous.

It inspired me to go to film school myself and become a filmmaker. That's how that desire to tell stories translated into film in particular.

Leslie: Can you tell us some of the most challenging and rewarding parts of your job?

Claudia: On "Fort Bliss"?

Leslie: Just as a filmmaker or director in general.

Claudia: What's rewarding is seeing a story you really care about come to life. Seeing it involve people that you've always admired. Working with actors like Michelle Monaghan, like Rom Livingston. Having great producing partners like Adam Silver and John Sullivan. Terrific editors like Matt Chesse and Carsten Kurpanek.

The project was just so motivating. It was really a passion project, I think, on every level. People worked so hard. That was just very gratifying that people felt as strongly as I did about the film and about the material.

In terms of what was challenging, everything that made it rewarding. We had to work so hard to get it done. It was a low budget film and so we were stretched thin on resources. We shot the film in 21 days so we had very little time to make this type of movie.

It was challenging because it has a lot of hard scenes in it. It has combat scenes. It has very emotional scenes with a very young child. It deals with all kinds of difficult issues.

In terms of the demands on the actors, the need for them to be emotionally present and engaged and doing some really intense work, that was all challenging but it was great. I think we loved as much as it was difficult.

Leslie: I think that was very evident in watching the film, how much of a passion project it was for all of those involved.

I want to switch a little bit and talk about your work with "Below the Beltway" because, of course, we're in DC. Most of that film was filmed in DC, starring Tate Donovan.

Can you tell us what it was like filming that project where you live?

Claudia: Shooting in DC was a great experience. We had so much fun shooting, "Below the Beltway." It's a comedy. It's a satire. The cast had a great time filming here. I think what I love about Washington as a place to work is there's such an incredible diversity in such a small area.

You can find cultural diversity, architectural diversity. We cheated. A scene that was supposed to take place in New York we shot in DC. The idea in "Below the Beltway" is the character goes on this quest to find somebody key in the investigation. He's supposed to go all over the place.

The fact that we were able to get all these different looks out of the city was really fun. The locations were tremendous. We got incredible support from the DC Film Office.

I think there, again, having the assistance of the DC Film Office gave the film a production value that it wouldn't have had otherwise, just like with my film "Fort Bliss." We had US Army support. Having their support gave us resources that allowed the film to have the production value it has. I think, also, the authenticity that it has.

Leslie: What do you like most about filming here in DC? Is it really the fact that it has that diversity or is it something else that draws you to the city when you look at it from a filmmaker's eyes?

Claudia: I think, from a filmmaker's perspective DC, like I said, it has an incredible diversity to offer. I think because it's less of a traditional film city than, let's say, New York or LA there's an excitement when you ask people if you can film in different places. They are sometimes surprisingly receptive whereas in LA I think there's a little bit of fatigue. If you go knocking on someone's door you're the fourth scout that's been to their house in the past week.

I think there's that. I'm also a professor at American University's School of Communication. I have a very motivated group of students that are smart. They're resourceful. I brought a dozen of them on to work on the film.

Things like that, feeling like I am working in my own backyard and being able to draw on what I know. There's, like I said, a real sense of energy and passion here that I think we can really mine.

Leslie: Are there any other projects that you would like to share that you're working on right now?

Claudia: I am developing a couple of new scripts. I think it's a little soon to talk about them. Yes, I am. I am thinking about my next project, for sure.

Leslie: Sounds good. Have you done any documentary work? Or all of your work has been fiction based?

Claudia: No. I was actually going to say that from the time I moved here in 2002 my work has been primarily in documentary and interactive filmmaking. I've spent about five years before writing "Fort Bliss" doing films for and about the military community.

That's, in a way, really what shaped the screenplay "Fort Bliss." That's really what informs my approach as a filmmaker now much more than the work I did before. Writing and directing "Fort Bliss" would never have been possible if I hadn't moved to Washington and had the professional and personal experiences that I had being here.

Leslie: What advice would you give to someone who's looking to get their start in the industry as a filmmaker?

Claudia: I think knowing what kinds of stories you want to tell is extremely important. I think having a good screenplay is what it starts with.

If you have any connections wait until the script is as ready as it can be before you go and show it to them because you often only get one shot. I think for people who are interested in starting out they need to educate themselves, whether it's through classes, whether it's through a formal program, whether it's just by attending conferences or festivals and meeting filmmakers and going to Q and A sessions.

Washington has so much to offer in that regard. There's so many festivals. There's so many events here that I think there are a lot of ways that people can immerse themselves in that industry and learn a lot before they even attempt to make their own film.

Leslie: If you could tell our listeners where they can go and check out your new "Fort Bliss" movie opening this weekend...I know it's on Sunday, right?

Claudia: It's on Sunday. Absolutely. It's very exciting. We're thrilled to be in the GI Film Festival. We're the closing night film.

The event is also a tribute to women in the military. Michelle Monaghan will be there, as will Oakes Fegley who plays the little boy in the film.

We will be screening at 6:30 on Sunday, May 25th. If people are interested they can go to the GI Film Festival website, which is gifilmfestival.com.

Leslie: Excellent. If they, by chance, cannot catch it this weekend where will they go and see the movie after Sunday?

Claudia: We're very excited, actually. There was an announcement last week that Phase 4 Films has acquired the distribution rights for "Fort Bliss." We're looking at a fall release. We'll have more information in the coming months. We're really thrilled that the film is going to be available to a wider audience very soon.

Leslie: Congratulations on that.

Claudia: Thank you very much.

Leslie: The website is fortblissmovie.com?

Claudia: It's fortblissthemovie.com.

Leslie: fortblissthemovie.com. Definitely go ahead and check that out and look out for the fall opening of that.

I just want to thank you again, Claudia, for joining us at "Reel Talk with Film DC."

Claudia: Thank you for having me.

Leslie: Absolutely. I thank you all for tuning in to "Real Talk with Film DC." This is your host, Leslie Green, signing off. Don't forget to check us out on the web at film.dc.gov. Like us on Facebook at [facebook.com/filmdc](https://www.facebook.com/filmdc) and follow us on Twitter at [@DCFilmOffice](https://twitter.com/DCFilmOffice).

Catch you next time.