

MINING FAMILY HISTORY

Tragedy meets triumph in Jesse Kreitzer's coal-dusted folktale *Black Canaries*. • BY DANIEL BOSCALJON



Black Canaries, a film by Jesse Kreitzer, offers a haunting meditation on hope and suffering told through a series of striking images. Set in the early 20th Century and focusing on a small family whose lives are exhausted by the daily need to survive, the film uses darkness and light to beautifully contextualize the struggle to thrive in difficult times. Kreitzer spoke with *Little Village* about his work, which will be on tour in Massachusetts, Vermont and Iowa, and which he advertises as “a 1900s coal-mining folktale.”

What is Black Canaries? *Black Canaries* was the thesis for my master's degree at Iowa. I chose Iowa initially because of my ancestral ties to the state. My great-grandparents were coal miners in Albia, Iowa, and it seemed a

A WINDOW TO THE PAST Jesse Kreitzer reimagines the lives of his Iowa ancestors as a folktale in his film *Black Canaries*.

good way to connect with my extended family—I found out my second cousins share my fascination and curiosity with history and the past. But, perhaps even starting with my 24-hour drive from Boston to Iowa, I came with a clear idea of how I wanted to use each semester and each year. I knew all my work would culminate in the making of *Black Canaries*.

Tell me more about your family, and how it inspired you. My great grandfather was a Welsh immigrant named Thomas Clarence Chapman—or TC. He was a coal miner his whole life, starting with being a door boy who maintained airflow in the shafts, and ending

with his becoming Mining Inspector for the State of Iowa. TC was a part owner/operator of the Maple Coal Mine, which is now a pile of shale in Lovilia, Iowa. You can tell where the mine was because the ground there is 10 feet lower, in a 180-yard triangle, where the shafts have settled over time. But researching my family was just my starting point for the film—the film isn't about them.

What is the film about, then? It's about a family trying to stay warm, stay alive. They depend on the coal; they die if they can't heat their home.

How does that relate to Black Canaries? The family is a canary bird—everyone is confined in their own cage. They're steeped in oppression. Whether they can pronounce it or not, they share a suppressed desire to escape. There's also a sense of their submission, something inescapable in their existence ... But the inescapability of it isn't just their dependence for warmth: It's veiled; it's covered by the ground. There's something magnetic about its depths, and I wanted to show how we're drawn to these depths, how we feed on our commitments whether they serve us or not. The father in the film unearths something—the reason he goes down is that he finds something, and it's probably based in delusion, but he keeps going down as a continual pursuit, and it will probably be the cause of his demise. The character's father is dying of black lung. Nothing ahead looks bright. But what are his options? To capsize the mine? Flee the land?

That sounds pretty bleak. Is that where the film leaves off? No—the ending is a wide shot that leaves everything open to the audience's interpretation. You see that the land is ripe and flourishing, and that the father is touching the plants. There's a tacitly that I wanted to communicate throughout the film. I wanted it to be a redemptive ending where, even though the father is blind, there will be a promising harvest. The land gives back.

So the film recognizes the fact of tragedy, but contextualizes this in a world of promise? Exactly! I want this to play well for festival audiences, and so wanted to avoid something



BEHIND THE SCENES Jesse Kreitzer (right) on set with director of photography Daniel Conaju. Photo by Ruokun Yi

unrelentingly bleak. I tried to highlight all possible moments of levity. My commitment was to telling a human story objectively.

How can a film be objective? Especially if you're only using one camera, aren't you making choices about what and how the audience sees? Isn't it an incredibly subjective process? Oh—of course! I meant that I have a drive for historical accuracy, for the details to be perfect, even if they were just details. I

world that people can immerse themselves in without romanticizing it.

What do you mean when you say “folktale?” I use the term liberally. It's an original story, not something out of an oral history. I guess by “folktale” I mean something that

teeters between being grounded in fact and something that, over time, transcends what historical record might exist. Folktales allow a lot of creative liberty—stories get bastardized and embellished. I wanted something grounded in a sense of historical accuracy that also could be a larger than life story, something with almost Greek tragic overtones, a rural folktale. Folktales are stories that are told, with history and embellishments.

What's the relationship between film and folktale? Well, there's not a lot of dialogue in the film. It's visually driven. I wanted to commit to that as an experiment, to ask the question: Can you sustain an audience's interest when limiting yourself to a visual language—without exposition or voiceovers? A folktale

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acquired a pair of authentic overalls from the 1920s, but I didn't focus on them—it was part of a wide shot. Same thing with a 1929 Model A—fully drivable, 90 percent original. It would have been beautiful to capture on film. Other people might have romanticized the car, but I wanted restraint. The point is making a



is about painting a world, and that's what my images do. There's a lot of ways audiences can access the film, a lot of interpretations of key moments. On my end, though, it was a painstaking process. I'm going through frame by frame—and there are 24 frames-per-second—to make each moment of the film perfect. I wanted to distill the story down to its purest essence.

What does that distillation process involve? Well, as an editor, it means cutting out a lot of things that took a lot of work. It means that nothing is sacred. We shot for eight days in winter weather that was in the teens—16-hour days. The movie is about hardship and fatigue, and the atmosphere cooperated—it was a challenging climate to exist in.

But we also did a lot. We built a 30-foot coal mine that we didn't use. I got a log cabin church, with Sacred Harp singers from Fairfield—and we didn't use any of it. As editor, I have to listen to the story the images reveal, beyond the original script. Originally, my script dealt more with the community and the town around the family. What I realized is that the essence of the film is the story of the family and the psyche of the life of a miner.

What did you find most appealing about the life of the miner? In a lot of ways, it was how I approach the creative process. It can be grueling, difficult. There are no guarantees, but there's a blind commitment.

What hardships or challenges do you anticipate once the editing is complete? Money. I'm in the hole. I've sunk everything I've had into the film financially. I have confidence when it comes to the movie, and I have been blessed with so many people who have been willing to support me to this point. I've raised \$29,000—but still need another \$18,000 to break even. Movies are expensive, especially when you want to do it right. It's hard because there's no real return on the investment: It's art, not business. I'm so incredibly grateful for everyone who has already contributed, and I'm hoping that as the film goes through the festival circuit that I can find more people who believe in it. **lv**

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