

# APPROACHING THE ELEPHANT



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## SYNOPSIS

Year one at a democratic free school, where classes are voluntary and rules created by vote.

Amanda Rose Wilder's feature debut dives head first into the inaugural year of the Teddy McArdle Free School, where all classes are voluntary and rules are determined by vote – adults and children have an equal say. Wilder is there from the beginning, observing an indelible cast of outspoken young personalities as they form relationships, explore their surroundings and intensely debate rule violations, until it all comes to a head. Evoking the immersive styles of Frederick Wiseman and Allen King, here is a rare, inspired portrait of unfettered childhood.

## TECHNICAL SPECS

Running time: 89 mins

Aspect ratio: 1:33:1

Original format: MiniDV

Screening format: HDCAM

Language: English

## CREDITS

Directed by Amanda Rose Wilder

Produced by Jay Craven, Robert Greene and Amanda Rose Wilder

Co-Producer: Caitlin Mae-Burke

Cinematography: Amanda Rose Wilder

Sound Recordist: Amanda Rose Wilder

Editor: Robert Greene

Additional Editing: Amanda Rose Wilder, Josh Melrod and Kamila Calabrese

Assistant Editors: Elizabeth Jane Theis and Benjamin Zucker

Cast: Giovanni, Lucy, Ethan, Olivia, Jalen, Sarah, Adam, Jake, Nicco, Chaz, Christian, Nicholas, Ciaran, Abigail, Alexander Khost, Elizabeth McCarthy, Dana Bennis, Pat Gamsby, Mason Shepherd, Dennis Charles

See Also:

[www.approachingtheelephant.com](http://www.approachingtheelephant.com)

Director Amanda Rose Wilder answered questions for [True/False Film Festival](#) about the making of and influences on *APPROACHING THE ELEPHANT*.

April 12th, 2014

*Amanda Rose Wilder's debut feature Approaching the Elephant spies into the first year of a "free school", a radical institution where all the rules are decided democratically and the teachers and students have equal say. An intimate observation reminiscent of the early direct cinema of Frederick Wiseman and the Maysles, the film captures an elemental power struggle between students Lucy and Jio, and their school director Alex Khost in striking black and white.*

*Approaching the Elephant was unveiled at True/False 2014, screened last weekend at the Wisconsin Film Festival and plays for the second time today at the Sarasota Film Festival. I got the chance to chat with Amanda about her film and its inspiration a couple weeks ago.*

-Dan Steffen

**T/F: How did you first hear about the idea of a free school?**

**ARW:** My father is an elementary school teacher. When I was ten we took a trip to visit Summerhill, the most well-known free school.

**T/F: Where's that at?**

**ARW:** Suffolk, England. It was founded in 1921 by A.S. Neill.

We visited for a couple days. It was a memorable and in some ways shocking experience. In elementary school I was the girl that followed the rules – but liked kids who stirred things up. Summerhill was full of uninhibited energy. The kids were all 'characters'...self-confident, bold, frank.

I remember I sat in on a writing class that began with a free write, something I've done since but hadn't at that point. I remember sitting there thinking, "what do they want me to free write?" while everyone else was furiously scribbling whatever they wished. I vividly remember a boy shouting during a democratic meeting, 'fuck off and die!' and went home quoting that phrase.

**T/F: So how did you decide on a free school as a setting for a film? Was it an idea that formed that early on?**

**ARW:** Well, it came about after I graduated from Marlboro College. Marlboro is a progressive college; the last two years you spend working on a thesis of your own design. My thesis was titled "The Poetic Documentary and the Documentary Poem" and I had gotten really into documentarians the Maysles and Wiseman and poets Marianne Moore and William Carlos Williams and how poetry intersects with documentary. After I graduated, my film professor, Jay Craven, asked if I wanted to make a documentary with him on progressive education. So, we scraped together a little money and I went to the Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) Conference. I conducted about 15 interviews with anyone I could grab. One of those people, who I just met on the street, was Alex Khost. He told me he was months away from opening a free school in New Jersey, twenty minutes from where I was living. He was open, charming, comfortable in front of the

camera. After the interview I asked if I could show up on their first day.

From the first day at Teddy McArdle Free School I could tell it would be an incredible thing to document and would fit nicely with the kind of direct cinema filmmaking I'd grown to love. There was a story unfolding before the camera, and a fascinating group of people, most of whom were children. I shot for two school years. The film comprises the first year, from the first day to the last day. I amassed about two hundred and forty hours total.

**T/F: So, what's True/False about your film?**

**ARW:** Oh man, good question . . .

Well, here's why I decided this was a story I wanted to tell: I quickly realized that the free school model allows for kids to be themselves in a way most schools do not. Their personalities are really able to come out. And as a filmmaker I have an interest in capturing people honestly, as their full-blown selves, warts and all, you might say, but lovingly.

I think you see this in similar ways in documentaries that are about kids outside of school, films like *Streetwise*, *Children Underground*. Kids' lives, as much as adults', are messy and complicated. I thought, wow, this model is allowing for me to capture the lives of children, something very true and rarely shown.

So I began the film because I had an interest in free schools and then realized I could capture this incredible social dynamic, these complex personalities. The model became a means to an end, a context for a story I wanted to tell.

**T/F: Yeah, it really reminded me of how intense childhood was, how important every conflict was in the moment.**

**ARW:** Yes, and more and more kids are being stripped of their ability to take risks and figure out conflicts, which leads to them not knowing how to. I came across a great article recently called ["The Overprotected Kid" in The Atlantic](#).

There's a line that describes well what I think is happening in child-rearing, "the erosion of child culture."

As much as I am inspired by Wiseman and the Maysles, I'm inspired by Cassavetes. *Love Streams* and *A Woman Under the Influence* as by *Gimme Shelter* and *High School*.

Cassavetes is my model for showing people honestly.

Perhaps there's a link between the erosion of child culture and the erosion of independent cinema. Films are less wild, less messy, less alive and energetic. More documentarians should take cues from Cassavetes and less from advertising and grant qualifiers.

**T/F: It's interesting how much Cassavetes influences documentary. His work always seems to come up . . .**

**ARW:** I feel like Cassavetes and the Maysles are soul sisters, two sides of a coin. Another of my influences on this movie was the Dardenne brothers. Have you seen *Les Fils (The Son)*? So much woodworking in that film. And a central man/boy relationship.

So, getting back to your question, what I hope is true about the movie is the depiction of childhood, in this full, vital, energetic, Cassavetes inspired way.

What's false? I tried to be as true to what I saw as possible. But, of course, what I hope everyone knows, I was only

there on certain days, I only captured when I hit record, and we edited.

But I feel the story is the story of the year. I think we accomplished realizing that.

**T/F: What effect did you think the camera had on what was going on?**

**ARW:** Not much. Because I was there from the first day, I was taken as a part of the community. I find if you relax and don't get in the way, people relax. Being a one-person band helps (I did camera and sound). I tried not to be a dominating personality over the kids, and I think they accepted me among them because of that.

Lucy especially was very comfortable from the get-go in part I think because her mother is an avid photographer, so Lucy was accustomed to a camera in her face. Lucy would say to new students, "That's Amanda, don't look at her camera, she just wants us to act natural."

**T/F: Haha.**

**ARW:** They picked it up quickly. Kids in general are less self-conscious than adults.

**T/F: It was really fascinating to see Alex, an adult, get pulled into all of the conflict between the kids because of the nature of the school?**

**ARW:** Well, it was his school as much as theirs. One of my favorite scenes is the meeting where Lucy and Alex are debating whether Alex should be allowed to make safety decisions by himself or if they should be voted on

democratically. More specifically, whether Alex telling Lucy to not jump off a high storage bin was harassment. I love it because they both take the meeting so seriously. Lucy holds her ground against Alex and Alex treats her with complete respect while at the same time stating his points. They're complete equals. And after the meeting, they go about their ways and are cordial.

How conflict is resolved between Lucy and Alex and between Jio and Alex is, of course, very different. And between Lucy and Jio. The trio was so fascinating. I felt so lucky to have not just one but three incredible people, and the dynamics between them, to focus on.

**T/F: When [I talked with Robert](#) (*Approaching the Elephant* editor Robert Greene) he said that the decision to use black and white made the story feel more timeless. Could you talk about that decision?**

**ARW:** While I was editing, before Robert came on as a collaborator, I'd now and then throw the material in black and white. The editing always seemed to just come together more naturally that way. I think it has something to do with going with the elemental, pure nature of the story. It looks so beautiful in black and white, like it could be from any time.

**T/F: Yeah, the conflict really feels elemental.**

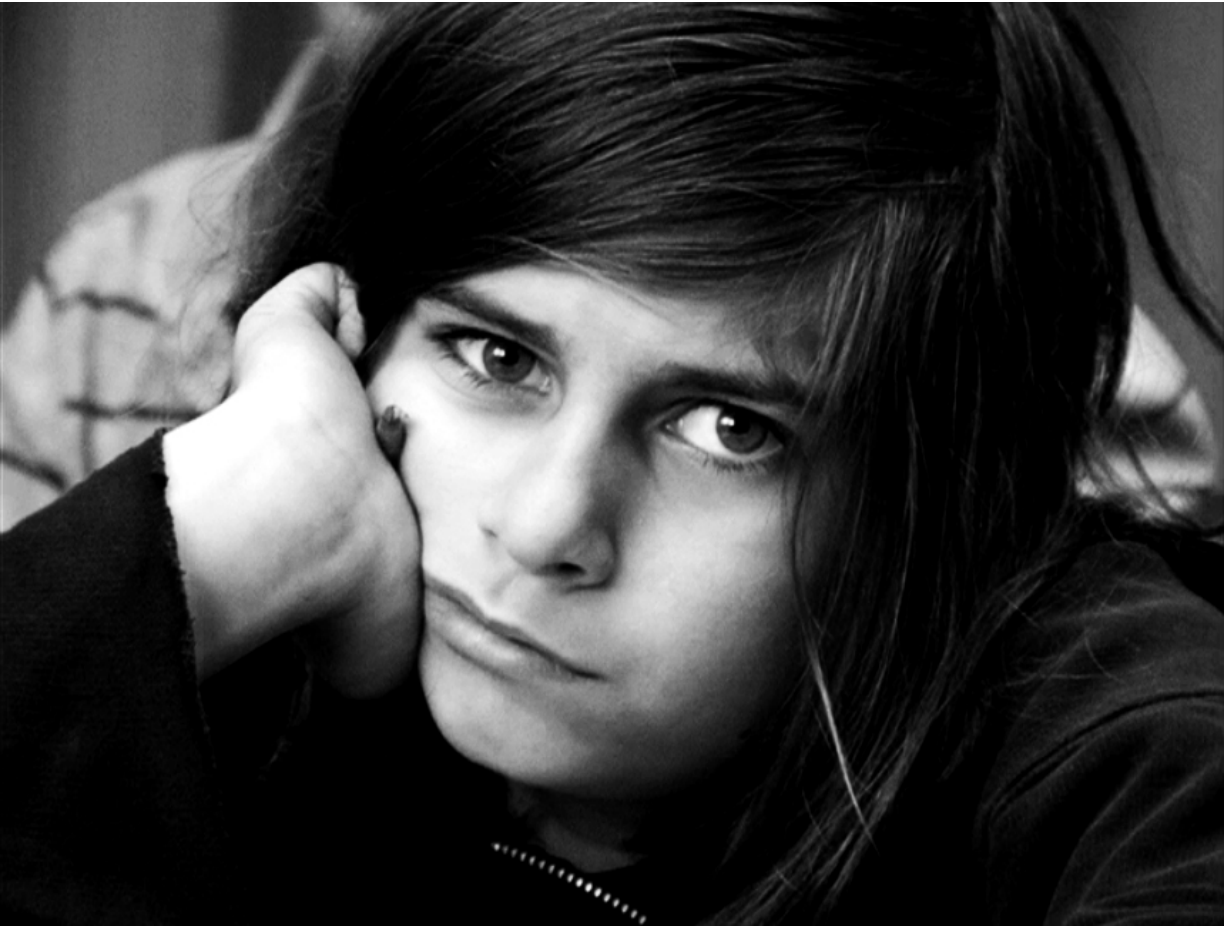
**ARW:** Yes, it highlights for me how it's about social dynamics, personality, people's faces . . . I think that's all I have to say about it. It was a pretty intuitive choice.

## Team Bios

**Amanda Rose Wilder** (Director, Producer, Cinematographer, Sound) Wilder spent years writing poems, then in the hills of Vermont fell into filmmaking, which led to a B.A. thesis “The Poetic Documentary and the Documentary Poem,” for which she created poetic documentaries and studied the works of poets Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Gary Snyder and Jorie Graham as they relate to the documentary impulse found in poetry. APPROACHING THE ELEPHANT is her first feature. Wilder has shot as second camera alongside Albert Maysles for Maysles Films, Inc. features and commissioned works. She has written articles on filmmaking and transmedia for IFP, Filmmaker Magazine, Nonfics and The Talkhouse. She lives in New York.

**Jay Craven** (Producer) Jay Craven is a Vermont-based independent filmmaker whose seven feature films include *Where the Rivers Flow North* (1993, with Rip Torn and Tantoo Cardinal), *Disappearances* (2007, with Kris Kristofferson, Genevieve Bujold, Charlie McDermott), and *Northern Borders* (2013, with Bruce Dern, Genevieve Bujold, Seamus Davey-Fitzpatrick). Craven’s documentaries include *After the Fog* (2005), *Dawn of the People* (1984), and *Gayleen* (1986). Craven teaches at Marlboro College, where he directs the Movies from Marlboro program where professionals mentor and collaborate with students through a film intensive semester that includes the production of an ambitious feature film. Awards include two New England Emmys and the Producers Guild of America’s 1995 NOVA Award. Festivals and special screenings include Sundance, SXSW, The Smithsonian, Lincoln Center, AFI, The Constitutional Court of Johannesburg, and Cinemateca Nacional de Venezuela.

**Robert Greene** (Editor, Producer) is a filmmaker and writer. Robert’s film FAKE IT SO REAL was named one of the 15 best films of 2012 by The New Yorker and one of the best documentaries of the year by Roger Ebert. His previous documentary, KATI WITH AN I, was nominated for a Gotham Award for “Best Film Not Playing At A Theater Near You” in 2010. Robert has produced and edited over a dozen award-winning documentaries, including his 4th feature, ACTRESS. He has edited films as diverse as Douglas Tirola’s HEY BARTENDER and Alex Ross Perry’s LISTEN UP PHILIP, while contributing editing to many more films, including LENNY COOKE (Safdie bros.), HELLAWARE (Bilandic) and THE VANQUISHING OF THE WITCH BABA YAGA (Oreck). Robert has also written movie reviews and essays on documentary film for outlets such Sight & Sound, Filmmaker Magazine, Hammer to Nail, Nonfics and the Indiewire blog Press Play.



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