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Casting Call Goes Out For New 'Little Fugitive'

Acclaimed filmmaker to revisit 1950s classic

By Joe Maniscalco

In 1952 filmmaker Morris Engel packed up his camera, headed for Coney Island and made a film that would quietly go on to become a classic of the American cinema.

"Little Fugitive" told the simple story of Joey, a scrappy seven-year-old Brooklyn boy who is fooled into believing he has killed his beloved older brother Lenny. Traumatized and alone, little Joey decides to go on the lam – all the way to the wilds of Coney Island.

What follows is approximately 80 minutes of rare movie-making magic capturing the innocence of youth in a way that perhaps no other film before or since has been able to match.

Francois Truffaut once said, "Our New Wave would never have come into being if it hadn't been for Morris Engel...with his fine 'Little Fugitive.'"

"Little Fugitive" won the Venice Film Festival's Silver Lion award in 1953 and was also nominated for an Academy Award for best story. In 1997 it was entered into the National Film Registry.

Now, acclaimed author and documentary filmmaker Joanna Lipper is preparing to re-envision the sweet and affecting story of the confused runaway for a whole new audience. Shooting for the updated version of "Little Fugitive" is set to begin this summer on location in Brooklyn.

An open casting call to fill the film's principal roles will be held at P.S. 9, located at 84th Street and Columbus Avenue, on March 27, at 10 a.m.

For Lipper, 31, the heartwarming story of the "Little Fugitive" might have more relevance in today's violent world than ever before.

"This central incident in the movie which is a practical joke gone too far, and a little boy tricked into thinking he's killed his own brother – which is the worse thing he can possibly imagine doing because he loves his brother so much – seems like something that is a very sensitive issue today," says Lipper. "What does death mean to children, what does it mean to lose someone?"

The anguish that both Joey and Lenny experience constitutes the underlying drama at the bottom of the big-hearted "Little Fugitive."

"Each brother has to contemplate the loss of the other," says Lipper. "First Joey does because he thinks he's killed his brother, and then Lenny as he's searching for his missing brother longer and longer and has to think, 'Oh, god, what if he's not at home hiding in the closet? What if he's been hit by a car? What if he's drowned? What if he's been kidnapped?'"

Devotees of the original "Little Fugitive" can expect to see many familiar elements in Lipper's new version – not the least of which is the venerable old Coney Island Cyclone itself, which serves as a very prominent physical link between the two productions.

"There are going to be a lot of homages and connecting things," says Lipper. "There will be some stuff on the beach of Coney Island. People still collect bottles so that hasn't changed – Joey still does that to get some money."

Other parts of the original have even been expanded.

“There’s still a pony in this one,” says Lipper. “The pony is probably in the movie more this time. It’s an important part of the movie, and Joey still loves horses.”

Lenny still plays the harmonica, too.

“All those sorts of beautiful central pieces are there,” says Lipper.

Lipper will also introduce some new elements.

“There will be more of a social awareness about the kids’ circumstances,” says Lipper, who grew up in Manhattan. “In the original movie you don’t see that the mother is working a lot, she sort of disappears. In this version the father is in prison and the mother is raising these two boys on her own.”

With their mother struggling to make ends meet, Lenny finds himself in a situation where he has to be like a parent to his younger brother.

“I think a lot of kids are in that situation now,” says the writer/director. “At age 12 if your mother is struggling, you often have to pitch in and become a man before your time. That’s what Lenny’s struggle is – his desire to have a childhood and be with friends his own age, and then having the responsibility of this little brother and being a father figure.”

Producer Frederick Zollo says he doesn’t like remakes, but as soon as he heard about the project, he thought that the Harvard-educated Lipper would be the “perfect person” to tackle it.

Lipper had previously won acclaim for two earlier documentaries called “Inside Out: Portraits of Children and “Growing Up Fast.”

The latter was based on Lipper’s book of the same name in which she tracked six teen mothers from Massachusetts through their last few challenging months of high school.

Zollo calls the documentaries two of the most beautiful short films he’s ever seen.

“I spent four years working with teenage mothers and their children in Pittsfield, Massachusetts,” says Lipper. “So, I really got to see a lot about the kind of milieu these kids in “Little Fugitive” live in.

Lipper also worked on 1994’s “The Madness of King George” in England.

Many already familiar with Engel’s 1953 classic might be wondering how such a simple and pure movie could possibly be shot in the cynical and jaded milk carton world of today, but Lipper is not deterred.

“That obviously is something that is a fear,” says Lipper. “But Joey is missing for a short enough time in the space of Coney Island, and he’s a pretty street-smart kid already, there’s also a certain amount of luck involved. But you do see that by the time the kid has been missing for awhile that Lenny is terrified.”

When Engel and partners Ruth Orkin and Ray Ashley hit the beaches of Coney Island 50 years ago, the idea of making an independent feature film was unheard of.

Many of the swimmers and sunbathers didn’t even realize that Engel was shooting a motion picture.

That won’t be the case when Lipper begins shooting for 30 days this summer.

“It’s not anywhere near like a facsimile of the original film,” says Lipper. “It’s taking it as inspiration to create something new.”

Lipper’s “Little Fugitive” is more story-oriented than the original and won’t incorporate a lot of the documentary-like crowd scenes that Engel employed.

“There’s less of that, although it will be a challenge to have the visual beauty that Ruth Orkin and Morris Engel were able to capture, at the same time realizing that times have changed and the ways that people can make those kinds of movies have changed,” says Lipper.

Engel – now 86 – is actually serving as a consultant on the “Little Fugitive” remake.

“I’m tickled and delighted,” Engel says. “It’s a lovely thing. It’s just one more small plus on top of a mountain of good things. The older I get, the better it gets. I feel very fortunate to be in the situation that I’m in now.”

Engel’s original budget for “Little Fugitive” was \$30,000 in 1952. Lipper’s will be under \$1 million – still low budget by today’s standards.

“Whatever Joanna does is fine and great as far as I’m concerned,” says Engel. “It’s my job to support her and that’s what I’m doing.”

These days when Engel thinks about “Little Fugitive” he says that “There’s an awful lot of magic in it, and a lot of it is beyond me.”

Many fans of the film will point to Richie Andrusco’s remarkable portrayal of Joey as a source of a lot of that magic.

Lipper is hoping that she will be able to get the same kind of performance out of the youngsters auditioning for her version of the movie.

The three starring roles of Joey, Lenny and a new third character called Destiny are open to SAG and non-SAG actors alike.

For the role of Joey, producers are looking for boys, six to eight years old. Those trying out for the Lenny part should be from 10 to 13 years old. The role of Destiny calls for a girl between the ages of 8 and 10.

Kids can also audition for the roles of Malcolm and Caleb at the March 27 casting call. Each part calls for boys between the ages of 10 and 13.

Lipper’s 21st century Joey is described as sensitive and perceptive.

“He tries to be tough but his emotions often get in the way,” says Lipper. “He’s like so many little kids who are bored playing with kids their own age; they always want to play with the big kids, the problem is the big kids usually aren’t too happy about including them.”

Though Joey is still the central figure in “Little Fugitive,” Lipper has expanded the role of Lenny in her version of the movie.

She describes him as an 11-year-old with smoldering intensity, anger, toughness and vulnerability of a young James Dean or River Phoenix.

“Whereas the original was primarily Joey’s movie, this movie belongs equally to both brothers,” says Lipper. “Lenny has a much bigger role in this version than he did in the original. This is as much his coming-of-age story as it is Joey’s.”

Malcolm and Caleb are Lenny’s two pals.

“They’re roughly the same ages of the main characters in Rob Reiner’s film ‘Stand By Me,’” says Lipper. “They are at that transitional point – their voices haven’t changed yet – they still look like boys, but they are facing very adult circumstances.”

Destiny is a new character that wasn’t in the original film. She’s the girl who lives in a foster home and befriends both Lenny and Joey.

“She helps Lenny look for Joey,” says Lipper.

All those auditioning should bring a non-returnable photo to the casting call.

Suzanne Smith, Billy Hopkins and Kerry Barden will be conducting the audition along with Lipper. Smith, Hopkins and Barden are the casting veterans behind such films as “Monster’s Ball,” “Boys Don’t Cry,” “Peter Pan,” “Cider House Rules,” “The Station Agent” and more.

“I love working with kids,” says Lipper. “So much more of their characters are visible and accessible. It’s almost like having your shirt on inside out. You see how it was made, you see the seams, you see the thread, and you see the different components of their character, whereas adults are more seamless, it’s harder to get to their personality because people are more defensive.”

When it opened in 1953 “Little Fugitive” played in 5,000 theaters around the country.

“That was one of the most surprising things to Morris, that this film that was made on a shoestring budget ended up being seen and loved by people of all ages,” says Lipper. “A lot of adults loved the original “Little Fugitive as well as kids. I’m hoping to have the same thing. The films that are my favorites of all time are movies like “To Kill a Mockingbird” and “A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.” They have that timeless quality. They’re serious movies about childhood, but they can appeal to kids and kids can understand them.”

The new version of “Little Fugitive” is expected to be released in 2005.

Go online at www.littlefugitive.com for more information about the production.