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Interview with Jessie Auritt, Director of Supergirl

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Interview with Jessie Auritt, Director of Supergirl

Abstract

This is an interview with Jessie Auritt, the director of *Supergirl* (2017), conducted by Bill Blizek.

Keywords

Orthodox Judaism, Powerlifting

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Author Notes

William Blizek is the Founding Editor of the Journal of Religion and Film, and is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is also the editor of the Continuum Companion to Religion and Film (2009).



Interview with Jessie Auritt, director of Supergirl, by William Blizek

Blizek: Let's begin with what drew you to Naomi's story.

Auritt: There were two things. First, it was amazing that this little girl could be setting world records in power lifting. Young girls (she was eleven when we met) who weigh all of 97 pounds do not do power lifting, and if they should try it, they don't take it seriously enough to think of setting world records. Second, a young female power lifter who is part of an Orthodox Jewish family seemed incongruous. So, I thought it was an interesting story that deserved exploring.

Blizek: Do I remember reading that you were an athlete in high school and college?

Auritt: I did grow up playing several sports. I started playing softball with my dad. Since Naomi got to spend more time with her dad when she started power lifting, playing softball with my dad may be one of the things that connected me to Naomi. I also rode horses, played soccer and Lacrosse. I didn't do any of these at the level that Naomi took up power lifting, but my background in sports meant that I didn't have to be afraid of the topic.

Blizek: In making the movie, what did you learn about the Kutin family's Orthodox Judaism?

Auritt: One of the problems the family had was that Naomi had to wear a singlet during competition and this seemed quite obviously to be an immodest way of dressing. Orthodox Jews are very concerned with modesty in dress for women. The family decided, however, that while the singlet would be immodest dress for a woman going to the mall or a girl going to school, it was not immodest for Naomi to wear a singlet for her competitions. The singlet was the required dress in a particular setting and was not, therefore, immodest. Another problem for the family was that they were not able to travel on the sabbath and that Naomi was not able to compete on the sabbath.

Blizek: From the movie it seemed that you had a remarkable access to the family.

Auritt: I did, as a matter of fact. I spent a lot of time with the family during the filming--between takes and before and after the scenes were filmed. I felt almost as though I was part of the family and I think that made it a much more intimate film than it would have been otherwise.

Blizek: Although most of our readers are interested in religion, some of them are probably interested in making movies as well. So, tell me, how do you select a subject to film?

Auritt: Probably the most important thing you can do is keep your eyes open. Reading stories in newspapers and other publications is one good place to look. Also, you need to be a good listener. You will often hear about a subject from the conversations of others. This gives you an idea that you can follow up on. You always need to be thinking about what might be a story you would like to tell.

Blizek: How do you fund your films?

Auritt: I don't think that there is any single method that works all of the time. You have to be constantly on the lookout for grants for young filmmakers. *Supergirl* was funded by two grants, and a Kickstarter campaign, in addition to self-funding.

Blizek: Do you have any interest in moving from documentaries to making narrative films?

Auritt: Actually, I don't. I like telling other people's stories; figuring out how to tell those stories well. I feel like I'm a sculptor. I take a big chunk of rock or marble and I shape it into something that people find interesting and want to see. I'm not like a painter, who has to create her own ideas and bring those ideas to fruition on the canvas. I'm not sure that I would be good at creating my own stories, but I am confident that I can tell other people's stories well.

Blizek: Do you have your next project in mind, or are you still caught up in *Supergirl*?

Auritt: I am very busy taking *Supergirl* to various film festivals around the country, but that doesn't prevent me from thinking about new projects. I have three or four things in mind, but you have to live with each of these ideas for a while before one of them just feels right and that's the one I'll pursue.

(For full disclosure: William Blizek contributed in part to the financing of this film.)