A Cinema Guild Release

Beeswax

A film by Andrew Bujalski

100 minutes / Shot on 16mm, Exhibited on 35mm / Dolby SR / 2009
Not Rated / Stills available at: www.cinemaguild.com/downloads

Publicity:
Sasha Berman
Shotwell Media
2721 2nd St. # 205
Santa Monica, CA 90405
Tel. 310-450-5571
Fax 310-450-5577
Email: sashaberman@mac.com

The Cinema Guild, Inc.
115 West 30th Street, Suite 800
New York, NY 10001-4061
Tel: (212) 685-6242, Fax: (212) 685-4717
www.cinemaguild.com

CAST

Tilly Hatcher……..…Jeannie
Maggie Hatcher……..…Lauren
Alex Karpovsky…….……Merrill

(in order of appearance)

Katy O'Connor……...……..……Corinne
David Zellner…….....Scott
Kyle Henry……..... Michael
Anne Dodge……...……..……Amanda
Betty Blackwell……..……...…….. Lila - lawyer
Bryan Poyser……..Jason - study buddy
Rebecca McInroy……Holly - office woman
Nathan Zellner……..... Lee
Atietie Tonwe……...……..... Emeka
Nina Sokol…….. Naomi - office mom
Jillian Glantz……..… Wynonna - office daughter
Janet Pierson……...…….. ...Sally
D.J. Taitelbaum……...……...…….. A.C.
Becca Cohen……..……..… Annemarie - customer
Moss Gillespie……...…..... Tony - young boy
Chad Nichols……...……. Evan
Jimmy Gonzales……...……...……Yann
Dia Sokol……..…….……Maryann- customer
Bob Byington……..…...Tom
Smiley Moreno……..….. Ralph- parking lot man
Peggy Chen……..…..….. Jin

FILMMAKERS

Writer, Director, Editor……...……...……Andrew Bujalski
Producers……..……...…..…Dia Sokol, Ethan Vogt
Executive Producers……..……...…Houston King, Gary Stewart
Associate Producer…….……Peggy Chen
Director of Photography……...…….Matthias Grunsky
Sound Recordist……..……..……..…Pacho Velez
Assistant camera……...……....Kate Dollenmayer
Sound Mix……...…Joseph Boyd Vigil, Modulus Studios
Keygrip……...……Michael Kleiman

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Overview

Beeswax is the third feature film directed by Andrew Bujalski (*Funny Ha Ha*, *Mutual Appreciation)*. Like Bujalski's previous films, the cast is made up of non-professional (but carefully cast) actors and filmed with a light, fast-moving crew. The goal is to tell an intimate, peculiar story the likes of which one could not achieve via a more traditional, large-scale mode of production.

Beeswax synopsis

The story revolves primarily around a pair of twin sisters – Jeannie, who has been in a wheelchair since youth, and Lauren. (Same face, different bodies...) Jeannie co-owns a used & vintage clothing store with her semi-estranged friend Amanda, while Lauren is between jobs (picking up some days filling in with landscaper friends) and between boyfriends, considering going overseas to teach English.

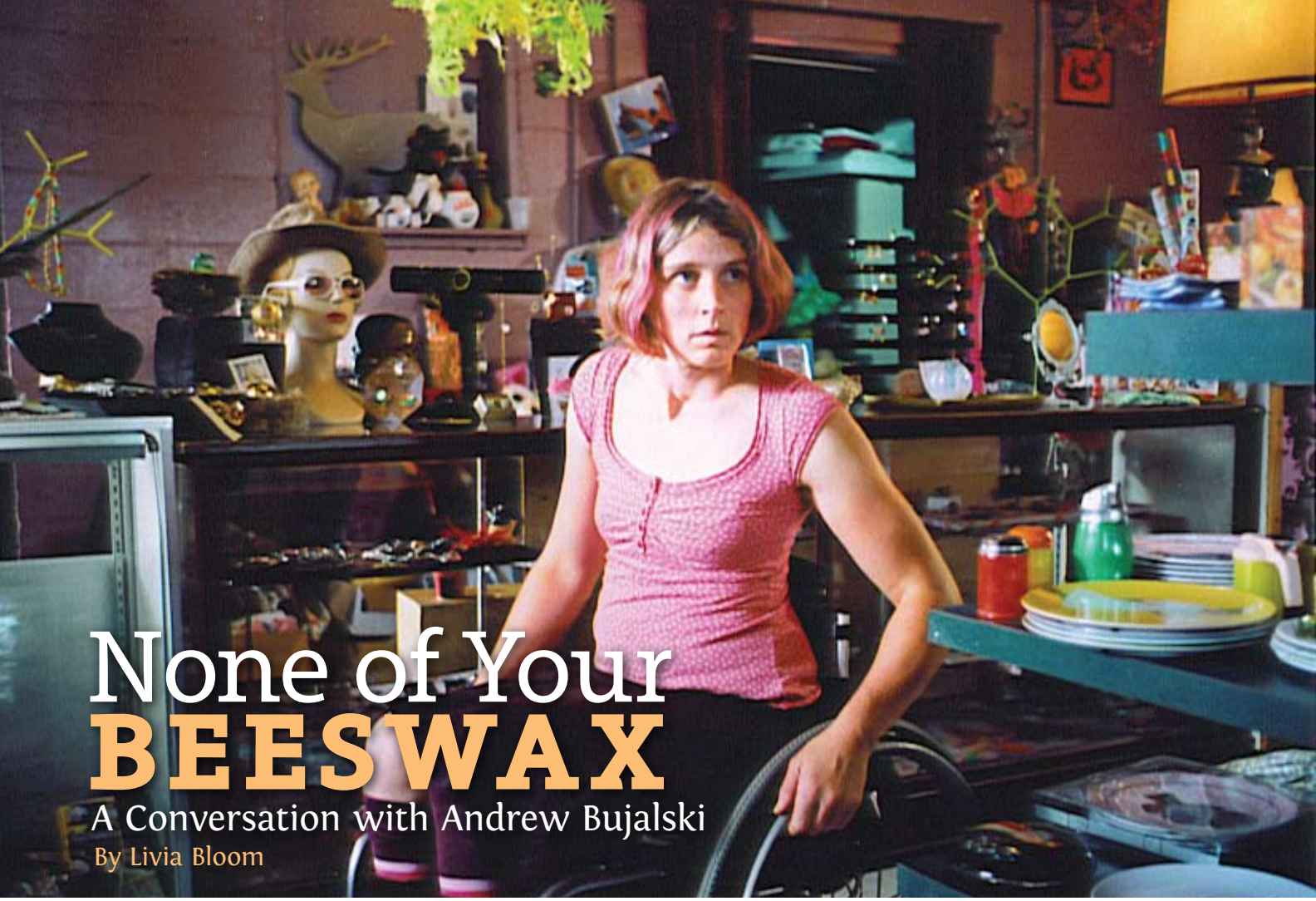
Tensions are mounting between Jeannie and Amanda, their management styles clashing and communication problems getting exacerbated. An e-mail from Amanda implying that their conflict will end in a lawsuit if necessary sends Jeannie into a mild panic--Amanda's lawyer father had written up all their agreements and Jeannie feels beleaguered and at a distinct disadvantage. She calls on an ex-boyfriend, Merrill, who has just graduated from law school and is studying for the bar, and after falling immediately into bed together, Merrill begins distracting himself from his own problems by trying to assist Jeannie.

Various strategies for dealing with the Amanda crisis are discussed and pursued, though it remains infuriatingly unclear exactly how serious the crisis is--Amanda remains in the background and no one knows how idle her threat has been. (She claims that she has no interest in wasting time or energy on a lawsuit, and naturally this denial fuels Jeannie & Merrill's paranoia all the more.) When Lauren, at loose ends, gets roped into a familial obligation back home with her mother, her mother's partner, Sally, somewhat overreaching her stepmotherly bounds, tries to involve herself in Jeannie's problems.

Beeswax is a story about families, real and imagined, people taking care of each other when they want to, when they need to, when they ought to.

Director's bio

Andrew Bujalski previously directed the films *Funny Ha Ha* and *Mutual Appreciation*. He has won the IFP Someone to Watch Award, and has been awarded grants from the Tribeca Film Foundation, LEF Moving Image Fund, and the Massachusetts Cultural Council. Both *Funny Ha Ha* and *Mutual Appreciation* appeared on various top 10 lists of films in the U.S. Andrew's films have been released for commercial distribution in the United States, the United Kingdom, Greece, Australia, Argentina, Russia, India, Chile, Poland, and Israel.



None of Your BEESWAX

A Conversation with Andrew Bujalski

By Livia Bloom

Beeswax, the beautiful, naturalistic new film by director Andrew Bujalski, is the tale of Lauren (Maggie Hatcher) and Jeannie (Tilly Hatcher), lively and lovely twin sisters living in Austin, Texas. The fact that Jeannie is wheelchair-bound hasn't stopped her from co-owning a vintage clothing store—with Amanda, an old friend who is slipping toward motherhood and away from Jeannie—or from capturing the hearts of men, like Merrill, an old flame who is slipping toward commitment and back into Jeannie's life.

Bujalski burst into the consciousness of cinephiles and critics with his two previous features, gathering a loyal following even without theatrical distribution for his breakout debut *Funny Ha Ha* (2002), which revelled in youthful inarticulateness in Boston. He followed it with *Mutual Appreciation* (2005), a vivid black-and-white reverie on twentysomethings in Brooklyn. Bujalski is both a neo-hipster Woody Allen and a Rohmer-like romantic; his increasingly sophisticated films imply Ozu's sense of ritual acted out within thoroughly modern strictures.

Bujalski's scripts are meticulously written, yet when caught up in the spell of *Beeswax*, which premiered in the Forum at the recent Berlinale, it's difficult to remember that his characters are just that: characters. Dialogue seems pitch-perfect; costumes fit to a tee; settings have personalities all their own; and compositions communicate both the casualness and the gravity of characters' singular, familiar lives with documentary-like credibility.

Any meaningful new creative voice is bound to meet detractors. Although *Beeswax* has already garnered impressive critical support from *The New York Times* to the *Los Angeles Times*, it was also chastised by an *Indiewire* blogger for a solipsism of which its director "should be ashamed." When that moralistic and accusatory tone emerges from the critical realm, it often indicates that a work has touched a nerve; in this case, the film has clearly captured the interiority of its characters to an unusual degree.

Part of this comes from the intersection between real and "reel" worlds, which Bujalski often blurs. Though the Hatcher twins do not live in Texas, for instance, like her character in the film Tilly

does use a wheelchair in daily life as the result of a spinal cord tumor. The magnitude of such a medical issue might have stopped another woman in her tracks, but both Tilly Hatcher and her onscreen alter ego handle it with poise. Her performance is introspective, revealing, and wholly convincing. Jeannie is as stubborn and feisty, wonderful and impossible, as anyone else stumbling toward grace.

CINEMA SCOPE: How did *Beeswax* come about?

ANDREW BUJALSKI: The methodology grew organically out of the previous films; we were working in a fairly similar style and with a lot of the same people. All three of my features have been written with the leads in mind, and in this case I've known the twins, Maggie and Tilly, for about ten years. I find them immensely charismatic people on their own, and then together they're almost overwhelming. I think it's been in the back of my head for a long time, the fantasy of a Maggie and Tilly movie; trying to harness what I find so fun and so fascinating about them.

That said, Tilly is quite unlike her character Jeannie in most ways. In fact, the character is as far afield from the actor as any character I've ever written with somebody in mind. I had a vague notion of a falling out between business partners, and I had the notion of doing something with the girls. So I started trying to find where there was overlap between the image in my head of the twins and the image in my head of this tale. In my initial idea, I thought the roles would be reversed. When we did the first screen test in 2005, I had it in mind that Maggie would play the storeowner, and Tilly would play her sister. I wrote up a little scene for it, and we tried it both ways. I came out of that thinking, "I was dead wrong. It's going to be the other way around." The kind of inward energy that Tilly was bringing made a lot more sense for this person who carries such an inward energy in the film and who has so much internal struggle. Maggie's character, Lauren, was bouncing off the walls, which is something Maggie is very good at.

Then I began to craft the story about the differences between business relationships and family relationships. It can blur borderlines when you're working with friends, which is something I've been doing for the last ten years. In my case, it's been extraordinarily positive, but certainly there are anxieties and fears, and I channelled a lot of them into the story. One pretty common approach to writing anything is to take your fears and try to give voice to them, in the hopes of exorcising them. Sometimes you do, sometimes you don't.

SCOPE: Did this one exorcise them?

BUJALSKI: I think it *exercised* them, though most of the fears and anxieties in my life stick around. Maybe they fade from foreground to background, but they're never gone for good.

SCOPE: You get remarkably realistic performances. I wonder if you could talk about your process of working with the actors?

BUJALSKI: That's absolutely my goal, so I guess the ends justify the means. I try to write the script with as much precision as I can, but when we get on set, the most important thing is that it sounds and feels right. Rule #1 is staying open to actors' ideas and actors' input; what feels right to them is more likely to work onscreen. Of course, that isn't *always* the case, and my job is to kind of be in charge, and keep people from going down a path that isn't going to make sense in the film. But anything they can bring that is going to enrich the film is great.

As a screenwriter, you try to tell the story in a fairly streamlined fashion. You have to be careful about making characters' motivations too complex on the page, because then the script becomes gobbledy-gook. When working with actors, you can bring some of that complexity back in, though that

requires absolute collaboration. When an actor can kind of take a scene and push against what's happening on the page, that's often where the most interesting stuff comes from. Part of staying open is trying things, and part of working with non-professionals is that there can be wild deviations from take to take. The writing process seems to get lost in a cloud by the time you get to the end of the film. Writing seems so long ago, and it's so completely internal that it's hard to remember how it came about. Still, I find it very difficult to stay in my own head that long. I did realize that I think I'm an auditory sort of writer. For me, writing starts from hearing voices in my head. My films are quite dialogue-heavy, and I think maybe that's partially because I hear them first.

SCOPE: Rather than picture them?

BUJALSKI: I think so. Certainly there are plenty of images that I work with, but the images are always vague things off in the distance. I feel like I'm running toward the images, and the way I'm getting there is by listening to the words. The sound leads me to the image. I just made that up; I don't know if that makes any sense.

SCOPE: That's a beautiful image...or should I say, sound. I have the opposite experience, so it's fascinating to hear about yours.

BUJALSKI: Yesterday I was at an outlet mall and we stumbled into the Bose stereo outlet, where a fine salesman sat us down and made us watch their Bose pitch. They said your television needs great speakers because, "Pictures tell you what's happening, and the sound tells you how it feels." I thought, "Oh my goodness—Bose stereo has just cracked the mystery of cinema!" I do like to spend a lot of time on the sound mix and trying to get it to sound right. The great majority of the sound in the film is direct sound, but in editing and in the mix, it's more about trying to get the rhythms to feel right. I'm often asked, "Why don't your films have scores?" and I realized last week that I think of the dialogue and the sound of the room as the score. To me, there's just a rhythm in these communications that are specific enough that I hope there's a kind of musicality to them. It's a jazz score, I guess.

SCOPE: But there is music in the films: I imagine those songs are pretty carefully selected.

BUJALSKI: Yeah. And this film has the most music cues of any of the films I've done, though they're as difficult to detect as they've ever been. With the exception of one character playing a song for the other, they're pretty far back in the mix. It's the songs playing in the bar, the coffee shop, or what have you. Even though most people might not even realize that there's a song there unless they're listening for it, I find that different things affect the rhythm of the scene in different ways, and not always in ways you expect.

In this film, for instance, there's a scene where Jeannie and Merrill meet up in a diner, two ex-lovers who haven't seen each other in a while. Initially, I thought we'd use this blues song I liked a lot, and then that fell through, so we tried it with this piano jazz. I really like the way it plays out in the scene. It's jaunty, which is nice, and there's this little bit of sexual tension between the characters, so you want something that has some pep in it, and puts some pep behind their words. At the end of the scene, a silence comes between them, but the piano playing becomes fairly wild; the player starts banging the keys. That to me helps to point them toward bed, which is where they're headed in a couple minutes.

So it's little things like that. And a lot of those things you project onto it. I don't think that everybody who watches the film is going to consciously or subconsciously hear the way the piano player is hitting the keys and say, "They're definitely going to sleep together," but the music seems to be supporting what I want the scene to be doing. At any rate, they're not at cross-purposes, which can happen.

SCOPE: The sexual tension between your characters is sometimes so uncomfortable, so thick in the room that it's palpable. How do you work with actors to develop that?

BUJALSKI: There're always tensions—and not necessarily sexual tensions—between any two actors. It's a kind of nerve-wracking thing to go up on that high wire, particularly for non-professionals, and so it does seem a fun thing to play with. On both *Mutual* and *Beeswax*, I felt that the characters who we're really building sexual tension with are people who, in real life, would be very, very unlikely to fall into bed with each other. Somehow, both times, we found an onscreen chemistry that didn't come directly from off-screen chemistry. Maybe it's they can use their nerves around each other as people to build a tension as characters. Maybe people who wouldn't necessarily fall for each other in life are better suited to play characters circling around each other than those who would. That's a very mysterious and interesting process, and I don't know where it comes from.

SCOPE: Even the brief scene where Lauren and her sister's boyfriend, Merrill, are lying on the same bed is very tense, for instance.

BUJALSKI: There *is* a weird tension there. It was an interesting thing to play with because we weren't making a movie about a guy who likes his girlfriend's sister, but you can't put two people on a bed together without raising questions, and especially when you're dealing with twins...Maybe that's just me playing

around as a writer, having fun with that kind of tension because in general, I like to put questions out there. The film is full of questions and tensions that don't get resolved in traditional ways, and they're all kind of amusing for me. It takes a certain kind of audience to enjoy getting to know the characters and the situations by questioning them. It obviously infuriates some people who say, "How dare you build a tension and not pay it off?"

But I like that in movies. Unresolved sexual tensions are especially great. There's that great scene in *Nashville* (1975) when Michael Murphy's character is fascinated by a woman, and keeps kind of staring at her. Nothing comes of it in the story, but it makes that scene so much more fun to watch him stare at her—and it's coming out of nowhere! I think that's so true to the human experience.

SCOPE: Each of your films has a very strong sense of place. This one you shot in Austin, correct?

BUJALSKI: Yeah. I used to live in Austin about ten years ago. When we were trying to decide where to shoot this film, myself, the girls, and the D.P. were spread out all over the country, so Austin kind of came up as a place to do it even though none of us lived there. But I still knew my way around, and I still knew a lot of filmmakers here; Austin certainly has a great reputation as a very supportive film community. So we decided to set ourselves up here. As a kind of coincidental result, I ended up moving back myself. But all three features were written in different cities than we shot them in. We could have made this movie in Boston, but then it would have been a very different movie. Casting a location is similar to casting an actor. There are a lot of different ways you can take the project, but once you've let the person or the place in, then you retrofit to that. Just as you allow the actors to have a great influence on what the story is, you allow place to do the same.

We were both lucky and unlucky in that it turned out to be one of the rainiest summers in Austin's history. So that cooled it down a fair bit, but it also interfered with plenty of our shoots. When we went out to shoot the one scene in a field, we had planned to shoot a day or two earlier but it kept raining. Finally we thought, "Well, let's just go out today and hope it's okay." We were planning to shoot in a completely different section of that place that's a little woodsier, but it was just so muddy. We were standing out there debating, but it seemed like a dire idea, and especially with Tilly's wheelchair. Then we thought, "Should we just come back and do it another day?" But we already had come all the way out there. So we just looked around the property and found that other spot where we hadn't been planning to shoot at all but it had a lyricism to it and it had that great fence. In the script, we have Lauren climbing on a tree, and that became the fence we used.

SCOPE: What was it like working with the wheelchair?

BUJALSKI: Tilly has been in the chair for a few years. When you're doing a film where a character is in a wheelchair, working with somebody who really is in the chair is a completely different experience than it would be trying to replicate that with an actor. In fact, it probably made it a lot easier for us to treat it matter-of-factly in the film—because it was matter-of-fact! And of course we also got the best technical advisor in the world right there. We could ask Tilly about all the logistics, "Alright, how would you navigate this space?" and it informs how we block the shot. A lot of times when you're trying to figure out how a scene should move, there's not an obvious answer. The chair sometimes would force answers upon us, which was sometimes a nice limitation to work with. And then you can kind of build the scene from there, and use that to make the scene feel more real.

SCOPE: Why is it important to you to work with non-professional actors?

BUJALSKI: Well, I think that you get an entirely different kind of performance from them. I have extremely limited experience working with professionals, and I think that if I'm lucky enough to keep making films, it seems unlikely that I could go the rest of my life without dipping my toe into that world—or indeed, dipping my whole self into that world. But I have the sense that professional actors are trained to aid the storytelling, and in their every move, microcosmically, to tell the larger story. When that works, it's an amazing and inspiring thing to witness. But as far as these three films that I've made, I wanted and needed motivations to be a little confused and confusing. I needed the characters to be figuring out what's happening as the audience is; not telling the audience what's happening, but struggling through it themselves, and I think it'd be very hard to talk a real actor away from streamlining. With non-professionals, you give them the situation and their character and try to let them feel that out and experience that as it happens. You don't look to them to wrap it up for the audience.

SCOPE: How long did it take you to make this film, soup to nuts?

BUJALSKI: As we were watching the first finished print at the lab, Obama was being inaugurated. When the lights came up, we all looked around the room and looked at our watches and realized what had just happened. It also occurred to me in that moment that I had spent the exact duration of Bush's second term working on this film. Every film that I've made has felt like exponentially more of a struggle than the

last. So wrapping my head around this one and finding it structurally took a while. But that's also kind of a never-ending process. You continue to tweak every scene until the day you shoot it. For instance, Lauren's first scene is this break-up scene. Right after that, she goes out his front door and runs down the street—that's something that wasn't in the script at all. So that's the kind of writing that happens on the last day of production. I'm going to get real cosmic; you can also say that editing is a kind of writing.

SCOPE: I would have thought that it would be the other way around: easier once you have more experience under your belt.

BUJALSKI: Part of it has to do with getting older. This is the first of the three films where the majority of the cast and crew are in their 30s, and there's a price... An actual financial price, for one thing. This film cost more. When you can't make everybody sleep on the floor and eat pizza every meal, the challenges kind of mount. Also, when we did the first film, we had no idea if anyone would ever see it. There's a tremendous freedom in that. I think we were also lucky that *Funny Ha Ha* had such a strange protracted lifespan that it still had yet to make its biggest splash when we were making *Mutual*. So even though shooting that film, when we'd kind of been through it once and knew that there would be people out there who'd want to see it, we were still fairly protected and working in something of a bubble. There was less bubble this time.

Our technical standards have also gotten a little more stringent. The previous films were shot on regular 16mm, but here we were shooting widescreen 1:85 on Super 16mm, which we'd never done before. That brought technical challenges with it, like the 1:33 aspect ratio, which obviously is odd these days. I mean, 1:33 is good for talky movies because it fits a person's head pretty well; you just put their head in there and let 'em talk. When you've got this other frame, you've got to figure out how to use it right.

We also put more pressure on ourselves. You never want your best work to be in the past; you always want to be *doing* your best work. There were days on the set that were great, and days on the set when I thought, "I don't know if it's working." It was a different kind of script. The scenes in this film tend to be shorter, and much more weighted with exposition than ever before, so there were many days when I came out of the day thinking, "Well, if the script works, than I think the scene will work, but I don't know otherwise." I think we had less room to play around, which is nerve-wracking.

SCOPE: This film does feel more grown-up; it has a new maturity. When Merrill tells Jeannie that he loves her, for instance, he does so with a clarity and confidence that is a far cry from what some of your past protagonists felt.

BUJALSKI: I don't know that maturity is a victory. I still have a lot of affection and, in some ways, a lot of stake in an adolescent viewpoint. And certainly, it's my own inclination always to wonder and always to have a bit of uncertainty. From my own perspective, growing up, I think you learn the value of commitment. I've learned about myself that I'll probably never be 100% sure about anything. I don't even feel 100% sure that filmmaking is a good idea! But having made a commitment to it, I've reaped such rewards. I feel like a much more complete and better and deeper person than I was as a kind of wandering soul, as I was before I devoted myself to making these films. So maybe that's part of it. Maybe, getting older, you're forced to commit more and more. That's sort of terrifying, but there are also rewards that you don't see coming. You don't know they're there until you reach the other side. Does that make any sense?