

L.B. Thunderpony Productions Present

# MANHATTAN, KANSAS

a documentary by tara wray  
USA | 2006 | 79 min. | Color

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## [ short synopsis ]

The parent-child relationship is emotionally charged from the moment a person is born. But it becomes especially complex when your single parent is mentally unstable, as is the case for filmmaker Tara Wray.

In her first film, Wray travels to rural Kansas in an attempt to reconnect with her mother, Evie, for the first time since Evie's psychotic breakdown five years earlier. She finds a parent still chasing her demons, both real and imagined, struggling to make a career for herself as an abstract artist and searching for the Geodetic Center of the United States, the finding of which, Evie says, will bring about world peace.

When Tara takes it upon herself to help in her mother's search, it sets into motion a surprising chain of events that may just rescue Evie from a catastrophic fate and help Tara reconcile with her mother on different terms.

## [ shorter synopsis ]

*MANHATTAN, KANSAS* is a first person documentary about a daughter coping with her mentally unstable mother. It delves into the complicated ways people care for one another, and offers insight into the mind of a parent struggling for physical and emotional survival, and the effects this has on those who love her.

## [ logline ]

*MANHATTAN, KANSAS* is a documentary about a most unusual mother and child reunion.

# [ festivals & screenings ]

[2008]

- Peninsula College Screening Series, Port Angeles, WA
- Black Lily Film and Music Festival, Philadelphia, PA
- Regular Company Films, Zagreb, Croatia
- Women & Creativity Film Festival, National Hispanic Cultural Center, Albuquerque, NM

[2007]

- India International Women's Film Festival, New Delhi
- St. John's International Women's Film Festival, Newfoundland, Canada
- Biografilm Festival, Bologna, Italy
- Maine International Film Festival, Waterville, ME
- Camden International Film Festival, Camden, ME
- Port Townsend Film Festival, Port Townsend, WA
- Jackson Hole Film Festival, Jackson Hole, WY
- Newburyport Documentary Film Festival, Newburyport, MA
- Charlotte Film Festival, Charlotte, NC
- Girl Fest Hawaii, Honolulu, HI
- Idaho International Film Festival, Boise, ID
- Wisconsin Film Festival, Madison, WI
- White River Independent Film Festival, WRJ, VT
- Brooklyn Arts Council 41st International Film & Video Festival, Brooklyn, NY
- Wagner College, Staten Island, NY
- San Francisco Independent Film Festival, San Francisco, CA
- NewFilmmakers Screening Series at Anthology Film Archives, NYC

[2006]

- SXSW Film Festival, Austin, TX (World Premiere)
- Independents Night Film Series, Lincoln Center's Walter Reade Theater, NYC
- Tallgrass Film Festival, Wichita, KS
- 2006/2007 Southern Circuit Tour of Independent Filmmakers
- Montgomery, AL
- Jackson, MS
- Sweet Briar, VA
- Clemson, SC
- Columbia, SC
- Beaufort, SC
- Orangeburg, SC
- Asheville, NC
- Greenville, SC

# [ funding & awards ]

[2007]

- Best Film, Brooklyn Arts Council 41st International Film & Video Festival, Brooklyn, NY
- Best Independent Films of 2007, FilmFest Reloaded Screening Series, Staten Island, NY

[2006]

- Audience Award Runner-up, 2006 SXSW Film Festival
- Tallgrass Film Festival Opening Night Gala Selection
- New York Foundation for the Arts Featured Artist of the Month (March)

[2005]

- Grant recipient, Anthony Radziwill Documentary Fund, IFP/NY Administrator
- Grant recipient, Jerome Foundation New York City Media Arts Award
- Fiscal Sponsorship, New York Foundation for the Arts
- Official selection, 27<sup>th</sup> Annual IFP Market, Spotlight on Documentaries
- Official selection, 6th Annual Public Television Mentorship Sessions

# [ reviews & comments ]

Simple and direct - and emotionally blunt and affecting - *MANHATTAN, KANSAS* acknowledges that love abides, even when forgiveness is not always easy or possible.

— Film Society of Lincoln Center

Painfully intimate, *MANHATTAN, KANSAS* plumbs a contentious mother-daughter relationship, showing a family's journey from estrangement to reconciliation and posing lingering questions about the line between mental illness and unconventionality. It's an honest look about growing up and letting go ... it's everything a personal documentary should be.

— Marrit Ingman, *The Austin Chronicle*

Insightful and moving.

— Bob Green, *Honolulu Weekly*

*MANHATTAN, KANSAS* is dealing with some big ideas, taking the “home movie” documentary genre and asking us to rethink our concepts of home and family in some fairly profound ways.

— Chuck Tyron, *the chutry experiment.com*

A wonderful example of a person picking up a camera, asking for technical help and emotional support, and then stepping out of their comfort zone to heal themselves and invite viewers into their life. I think it should be on everyone's viewing list. It's honest, full of life.

— Wiley Wiggins, *wileywiggins.blogspot.com*

Anyone who's ever struggled through a long-standing family rift, only to come back together in tentative fashion, should appreciate Tara's low-key and no-frills approach to storytelling. Her self-deprecating attitude only serves to amp up the ‘reality’ of the tale. This is not a filmmaker aiming for a huge sweeping statement, but a girl with a camera hoping to reconnect with one lonely parent. The “smallness” of *MANHATTAN, KANSAS* is what makes the film so engaging.

— Scott Weinberg, *eFilmCritic.com*

*MANHATTAN, KANSAS* is extremely emotional; it will make you question your own relationship with your mother, because there is no such thing as a “normal” relationship. The film has its moments where you will tear up, and Tara's expression of emotion will have you pulling for her and her pursuit for a happy family.

— Elizabeth Stannard Gromisch, *Feminist Review*

# [ key crew bios ]

**Tara Wray – Director.** Wray was born and raised in Manhattan, Kansas, also known as “The Little Apple.” She is an eighth grade dropout with a degree from NYU, and a self-taught filmmaker with a background in fiction writing. Her first film, an autobiographical documentary named in honor of her hometown, premiered at the 2006 SXSW Film Festival where it won an audience award. The Austin Chronicle called it “everything a personal documentary should be.” It went on to screen at New York’s Lincoln Center, and at more than two dozen film festivals worldwide including showings in India, Croatia, Italy and Newfoundland. *MANHATTAN, KANSAS* received funding from the Jerome Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts and the Anthony Radziwill Documentary Fund and is a sponsored project of the New York Foundation for the Arts. Wray is currently in post-production on a new documentary called *Cartoon College*, about a school for cartoonists in Vermont.

**Michel Negroponte – Producer, Camera.** In addition to the Emmy award winning *Jupiter’s Wife*, which received a Special Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival in 1995, Negroponte’s directing credits include *Space Coast*, *Silver Valley*, *No Accident*, and, most recently, *Methadonia* (2005 New York Film Festival, HBO). In addition to his own work, he co-produced several other feature documentaries: *Bookwars*, *Fastpitch*, *Orthodox Stance*, and the Academy Award-nominated *Children Underground*.

**Alan Oxman – Producer.** Oxman’s editing credits include *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, *Happiness*, and *Storytelling*. He was supervising editor and co-producer of *Control Room*, and editorial consultant on the Oscar nominated documentary *No End in Sight*. Other co-producing credits include *Children Underground*, which won a Special Jury Prize at Sundance in 2001, and Best Documentary at the IFP Gotham Awards that same year. Oxman most recently produced *An American Soldier*, an official selection of the 2008 Sundance Film Festival.

**Randy Bell – Co-Producer, Camera.** Bell is a New York-based documentary filmmaker. *Orphans of Mathare*, a doc examining the lives children living an orphanage in Nairobi, Kenya, is his third film. AMPAS recognized his first film, *Look Back Don’t Look Back*, as an Outstanding Documentary from 2000. The film won Best of Festival at the New England Film and Video Festival in 2000 and Best Short Documentary at the Cleveland Film Festival in 2001.

**Cindy Lee – Editor.** Lee holds an M.A. in East and Southeast Asian Studies from Lund University in Sweden and worked in community relations at The Walt Disney Company before editing *MANHATTAN, KANSAS*. Her most recent edit is the Academy Award nominated *No End in Sight*, which premiered at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival where it won a Special Jury Prize.

**Lilah Bankier-Park – Supervising Editor.** Bankier-Park’s feature credits include *Control Room* (2004 Sundance Film Festival) and *Unscrewed* (First Film Special Distinction, 2003 Montreal Film Festival, Special Jury Award, 2004 Santa Barbara Film Festival). She was an additional editor on *Eat This New York* and *Tadpole* (Best Directing Award, 2003 Sundance Film Festival), and the assistant editor on Gus Van Sant’s *Gerry*. Her television credits include *The Blues*, executive produced by Martin Scorsese for PBS, as well as programs for Oxygen, A&E and VH1.

**Jason Zumpano – Music.** Jason was the drummer for the pioneering pop group that bore his last name—Zumpano—a band he co-founded with Carl Newman of The New Pornographers. Jason now fronts the band Sparrow, which he formed in 2003.

# [ tara wray on the making of the film ]

I'm obsessed with the minutia of my mother. It informs all my creative work, always has. That's because she's such a beguiling lady. When I was growing up, her moods were unstable and often scary, especially when she was under stress and drank or smoked pot. Occasionally she lost control: when I was nine she threw a cup of scalding hot coffee in my face. This kind of behavior was especially hard to understand because if I was certain of one thing in the world it was that she loved me. Even when we were homeless she loved me; even when she took me out of school at 13 so we'd never have to be apart she loved me; even when she dragged me around, running from her demons, I still knew she loved me. That's just how things were. One minute she was Mom—funny, tiny, strong, a pleasure to be around. Mom. Then she was Not-Mom—scary, dark, shrunken, yet huge. I spent my whole life trying to anticipate which one was present, which one might show up next. It made me a pretty tightly wound kid. It also gave me a story to tell.

I'd been writing thinly veiled fiction about her since I moved to New York in August 2001, and I was getting this work published in small magazines. I wasn't in contact with her at this time, wasn't returning her phone calls or emails, but felt the stories were my way of communicating with her (some were available on the Internet and I had a hunch, which I later confirmed, that she'd been reading them). I been trying to write a novel about her, from her point of view, but it was awful. I didn't have the skills for it and I was running out of creative juice. So I came up with a rough plan to make a documentary instead. And *MANHATTAN, KANSAS* was born. The exact moment things gelled was in November 2003 while I was watching *To be and to Have*, a documentary about a one-room schoolhouse in a remote French village. It was during a scene near the beginning, just an incredibly ordinary moment where a little girl is riding a bus on a snowy road, that I finally understood that in order to turn my obsession with my mom into something productive, to tell our bizarre and entertaining history, I'd have to face her again and let the story speak for itself.

That fall another thing happened: I fell in love with graphic novels, devouring books like *Maus*; *Jimmy Corrigan*, *The Smartest Kid on Earth*; *Epileptic*; *Blankets*; *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*; and *Persepolis*. These works proved crucial in helping to push me in the direction of visual storytelling. So did movies: *Sherman's March*, *An American Family*, *High School*, *Hybrid*, *Bill's Run*, *Vernon, Florida*, *Burden of Dreams*, *Gates of Heaven*, *Space Coast*, *The Ballad of Ramblin' Jack Elliott*, *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, and *Number Our Days*. This was my version of film school, the inspiration for my transition from writer to filmmaker. I also missed my mom. I didn't realize it at the time, but making a movie was really an excuse for me to go see her (we'd been estranged since 1999). Piecemeal education in place, I had to make sure my subject was interested. I proposed the idea to my mom in an email, simply asking if she'd like to be in a movie I was thinking about making. She said yes. This was our first contact in years.

By July 2004 I'd managed to surround myself with a small crew of very talented, very experienced people. Jeremy Spear, director of a documentary called *Fastpitch*, really got things rolling for me, and purely by chance. I liked his film and emailed him to say this. I told him I wanted to make a movie of my own and I asked where I should start. He said write a treatment. Once I figured out what a treatment was I spent a few months working on one and then sent it his way. Jeremy put me in touch with Michel Negroponte (director of *Methadonia*, and *Jupiter's Wife*, among other films), whose work I was familiar with, and Michel

and I met to talk about the story and where I thought the movie was taking me. Not long after, he came on board as producer and cinematographer. Michel brought a filmmaker named Randy Bell (director of *Orphans of Mathare* and *Look Back, Don't Look Back*) into the picture and he too agreed to shoot with me in the summer of 2004.

By the time I headed to Kansas I'd stopped writing fiction altogether. I was living a story that was writing itself. Case in point: I cut off contact with my mom shortly after she had a psychotic breakdown and threatened to kill us both. This was fresh in my mind—it was drawing me to her, which in turn was drawing me to a place called Hunter, KS, population 65, which is where we'd shoot the film. She was living in Hunter as caretaker of Seraphim House, a rundown estate owned by a religious cult called the Messengers of Peace. Why did I need fiction?

Having Michel and Randy there during production was a terrific buffer between my mother and me. It would have been way too intense to spend a month with her without the weight of the project pulling me through (and I can say for a fact that I wouldn't have gone to see her if not for the film). And though it seemed nothing changed between us while I was home—I didn't leave making sweeping pronouncements about the resolution of our relationship—the shoot still wound up being hard and tiring and sad and drunk and lovely and perfect and the most wonderful thing I have ever experienced.

When we said our goodbyes in August of 2004, my mom was about to be evicted from Seraphim House and I anticipated that she would find herself, once again, homeless. I didn't know how to help her and I didn't know when—or if—I'd see her again (two of my self-imposed rules before going to Kansas were that I wouldn't get in a car with her if she was driving and I wouldn't give her money). I began to realize I was making a very depressing movie, and, worse yet, our story seemed like it would never end on a happy note. She kept telling me she would be okay, but the evidence suggested otherwise: she had no money, no job, no prospects of a job, no place to live, and no transportation. Things were just like they were when I was younger, only this time I was an independent person; I could leave, which I did, thinking nothing of a prediction she'd made weeks before. This prediction revolved around the reason she'd moved to Hunter in the first place, which was to find the Geodetic Center of the United States. She said if she could find it she would be able to create peace and her life would come together. Earlier in the shoot we'd gone searching for this location, and eventually I found the rancher who owned the property and he took us to the spot. It consisted of two orange survey poles and a bronze plate high atop a windy hill. Out on the prairie that day my mom said her mission had been fulfilled. She cried tears of happiness, keep repeating, "I got here. I did it." Inside I felt like weeping, shaking her, saying, "You got where?! You did what!?" But I kept quiet. Little did I know finding that marker would end up changing the course of my film, and my mother's life, and *my* life, literally giving us an ending so strange and fantastical you'd swear it was fiction.