

PIONEER

Written & Directed by David Lowery
Produced by Toby Halbrooks & James M. Johnston

Running Time: 15:40
Aspect Ratio: 16:9
Sound Format: Stereo

Short Synopsis

A father tells his son the most epic bedtime story ever.

Long Synopsis

A little boy awakens from a nightmare on a dark and stormy night. His cries wake his father, who comes to his room and proceeds to regale him with a dark and epic bedtime story that is one part history, two parts make believe and riddled through and through with the honest-to-goodness truth.

Cast & Crew

Dad.....Will Oldham
Boy.....Myles Brooks

Director of Photography.....David Blood
Camera Operator.....Hutch Muselessmime
Grip.....David Pink
Production Designer.....Kara Keith
Art Assistant.....Valerie Mangum
Art Assistant.....Nick Prendergast

Sound Design.....Tim Nagle
5.1 Surround Mix.....Skywalker Sound
Original Score.....Daniel Hart

BIOS

DAVID LOWERY

David Lowery is an award-winning filmmaker from Texas. His debut feature, *St. Nick*, premiered at the 2009 SXSW Film Festival and went on to play dozens of other film festivals around the world. That film was released theatrically in the spring of 2011 to rave reviews from the New York Times and Wall Street Journal. His follow-up directorial effort, the short film *Pioneer*, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January, 2011 and won the Grand Jury Prize at SXSW the following March. It has played nearly 30 film festivals around the world to date. Lowery is an alumni of the Talent Campus at the Berlin Film Festival and IFP Narrative Labs. In 2010, the Independent Film Channel declared him an 'Independent Icon.' Filmmaker Magazine named him one of the 25 New Faces Of Independent Film in 2011.

JAMES M. JOHNSTON & TOBY HALBROOKS

As producers, James and Toby recently received a Sundance Creative Producing Fellowship for their work on the upcoming feature *Ain't Them Bodies Saints*.

James M. Johnston is a producer and filmmaker from Fort Worth, TX. He has produced all of Lowery's films, including the feature length *St. Nick* and *Pioneer*. He also produced Tom Huckabee's 2010 feature *Carried Away* and Yen Tan's award-winning 2008 film *Ciao*, which was distributed theatrically by Regent Entertainment. His own short films have been showcased at dozens of film festivals, and his latest directorial work was the recipient of a production grant from Rooftop Films. In addition to filmmaking, Johnston is a vegan chef, and operates two successful restaurants with his wife.

Toby is a producer from Dallas, TX who came to film after touring the world for six years as a member of the rock group The Polyphonic Spree. *Pioneer* marked his first narrative project; however, he's cut his teeth as a successful commercial producer and director, and together with David Lowery has also helmed a number of acclaimed music videos for artists such as School Of Seven Bells and Okkervil River, and advertising bumpers for the SXSW Film Festival.

WILL OLDHAM

Will Oldham, better known by the stage name Bonnie 'Prince' Billy, is an American singer-songwriter and actor.

MYLES BROOKS

Myles recently turned five years old. *Pioneer* is his first film.

FESTIVALS & AWARDS

Pioneer has played at almost 30 Film Festivals worldwide. The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2011. Below is a list of our awards:

- SXSW Film Festival- Jury Prize for Best Narrative Short
- Festival Internacional de Cortos FIB (Spain) - First Prize (Jury Award)
- Ashland Independent Film Festival - Jury Prize for Best Narrative Short
- IndieGrits Film Festival - Short Grits Award (Juried Prize for Best Short)
- Nevada City Film Festival - Jury Award for Best Narrative Film
- Port Townsend Film Festival - Grand Jury Prize for Best Narrative Short

Ficks' picks: Sundance and Slamdance '11

1. *Take Shelter*

2. *The Off Hours*

3. *Meek's Cutoff*

4. *Pioneer* (David Lowery, US)_This 15-minute short *Pioneer* stars Will Oldham (aka singer Bonnie "Prince" Billy, star of Reichardt's *Old Joy*) as a father telling a bedtime story to his son; it's easily as powerful as any of the 37 features (out of the 120 programmed) that I saw at this year's festival. As dad continues to read the book and as the story continues to go deeper and darker, the simple and priceless interaction between father and son may remind you of some moments long forgotten. If you are looking for an hypnotic child actor for your next film, track down Myles Brooks immediately!

5. *Old Cats*

6. *Uncle Kent*

7. *In a Bette World*

8. *Without*

9. *Pariah*

10. *Martha Marcy May Marlene*

11. *Submarine*

12. *The Mill and Cross*

13. *Like Crazy*

14. *Hobo With a Shotgun*

15. *The Troll Hunter*

Jesse Hawthorne Ficks has been teaching Film History at the Academy Art University for six years and has curated MiDNiTES FOR MANiACS [1] for 10 years, a film series devoted to screening 35mm prints of dismissed, underrated, and overlooked films in a neo-sincere way.

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"PIONEER" DIRECTOR DAVID LOWERY By James Ponsoldt on Friday, January 28th, 2011

Tags: Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo, David Blood, David Lowery, James Ponsoldt, Myles Brooks, Pioneer, post production, production, Septien, short film, St. Nick, Sundance, Take Shelter, The Catechism Cataclysm, will oldham



To create a feature with a genuine sense of mystery pulsing beneath the filmed veneer is a rare accomplishment, but to achieve that in a *short film*? Next to impossible. However, *Pioneer* — David Lowery's tender, moody short — is an absolute cryptogram.

Little more than a father (well-played by musician/actor Will Oldham) telling a tall and violent tale about an absent mother to his young son, *Pioneer* manages to stay within the confines of a bedroom yet utterly transports the audience to the high altitudes of childhood imagination.

Lowery's facility to direct children was on fine display with his wonderful 2009 feature, *St. Nick*. While *Pioneer* perfectly casts Oldham as the master storyteller that he is, it's the wide-eyed four-year-old Myles Brooks who provides the heartbeat of the film, showing that every good story requires the same thing: a great *listener*.

FILMMAKER: You direct videos, shorts, and your feature — *St. Nick* — is one of my favorite films of the past couple years. Do you have a preference between making shorts and features? Do you approach them differently? A lot of directors "graduate" to features and don't really look back, but not you. Can you talk about the appeal of the different forms?

LOWERY: I don't really have a preference; some stories necessitate feature lengths, and others don't, and I just take them as they come. I suppose there's a certain level of experimentation that short films facilitate — and music videos as well — and I like to use them as testing grounds for bigger ideas. But I don't discriminate.

FILMMAKER: I'd love to talk about the casting for *Pioneer* — it's wonderful. Such a beautifully acted film, and a lovely screen duo. Can you talk about Myles Brooks? He has that amazing, vulnerable screen presence that some children have, and seems to be discovered, not taught. How'd you find him? How'd you work with him?

LOWERY: We found Myles in an open casting call. He was four years old, the youngest kid we saw, and he'd never acted before. He was so calm and patient and had an innate ability to internalize whatever directions I'd give him. We were pretty certain from the moment we saw him that he was the right kid. Once he had the part, we spent a lot of time working with him, just getting him used to the idea of being around cameras and lights and such. And we read a lot of stories to him. We had different versions of the story from the film that we'd workshop with him; shorter, less intense iterations. We had his dad read him a version of it every night before bed the whole week leading up to production, but we left certain details out so that they'd catch him by surprise when we started shooting. And we'd practice his dialogue too, and different ways of saying it. Since he couldn't read yet, he just learned the part through gentle repetition.

FILMMAKER: Will Oldham is, while still in his thirties, something of a legend. Certainly mysterious. And while people obsessively follow his musical output, he's also such a fine, fine actor. How'd you wind up casting him? And what was your director-actor relationship like with him?

LOWERY: After I wrote the script, I just got fixed on the idea of Will playing the dad. I'd never met him, but I love his music and he seems like such a natural storyteller, you know? His songs so often feel like stories, like

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folklore of some sort. So once he agreed to do it and we talked on the phone about it, I was pretty certain I wouldn't have to give him too much direction, and indeed, he understood the project very deeply and came to it very prepared. He's a hard worker and takes acting very seriously. It's essentially a 15-page monologue, and he knew it through and through and was keen to all the tiny changes I made from one draft to the next. While we were shooting, I'd point his performance in certain directions from time to time, but for the most part he knew what I was after.

FILMMAKER: You have two actors in your film: one who's a young newcomer, and one who's been acting in films for over two decades. How do you as a director create an environment that's equally accommodating for both of them?

LOWERY: I think we all catered to Myles, Will included, just because of the practical nature of shooting a film with a four-year old. But aside from that, I wanted the shoot itself to be predicated upon their relationship, their rapport. So I made sure we had enough rehearsal time, enough time for them to bond and get used to each other, and also by never cutting on the set itself. We'd sometimes roll for up to 30 minutes at a time, going through the entire story. Will really got to perform, which in turn helped Myles get into the mood and pace of the story more easily than if we were stopping and starting.

FILMMAKER: How were the questions about character/story that Myles and Will asked you on set different?

LOWERY: Will had a few questions about the story or intent from time to time; Myles would wonder when we were gonna be done or what we were having for lunch.

FILMMAKER: Can you talk about how the idea for the film developed?

LOWERY: I had written a page or two of a screenplay a few years ago that started with a Civil War soldier wandering across a field and finding a survivor of a massacre. It always stuck with me, and I also had been thinking about the concept of timelessness, of a character on whom time has no bearing, like Woolf's *Orlando*. I love that idea. And then last May I was working on a feature script and was toying with a scene in which a father tells a story to his daughter. I had been stuck on that and went out for jog, which is when all my best ideas occur, and as I was running I thought back to this idea with the soldier, and suddenly the entire story just unfolded in my head. I ran back home and wrote it. I wrote it in Word because I figured I'd be able to get it down faster if I wasn't paying attention to screenplay formatting, and it worked.

FILMMAKER: *Pioneer* is really a story about storytelling — and it also touches on some pretty fundamental experiences and emotions (processing grief, confronting fear, learning to discuss loss and death, using imagination). Did you always imagine that the film would always just be the father and son in one room?

LOWERY: Yeah. I wasn't completely sure I could get away with it, but that was always the plan, for exactly the reasons you mentioned. If it ever left the room, it would stop being about those experiences and emotions and just literally be about the story. The story is great, but the movie is more about the fact that he is telling it.

FILMMAKER: It's really a mysterious film, and it exists in that gray zone of childhood, where a parent tries to shield a child, presenting the hard facts of growing up in a way that's honest but manageable. Can you talk about that mysterious childhood place?

LOWERY: It's something I feel strongly about, and that is really hard for me to really get into it in literal terms. I know kids can handle a lot, some more than others, and I know that there's a thrill to being scared at that age, especially when you know your parents are there for you. It's got to be valuable in some way, right? I based a lot of the movie on my memories of my dad, and the stories he'd tell me and my brothers, which sometimes got ludicrously gruesome. I grew up in Wisconsin and so he'd tell us stories about Ted Bundy fighting the Easter Bunny and stuff. I don't know if those tales had any life lessons, per se, nor do I think they harmed me; they were scary, and now they form the core of some of my fondest memories, so I must have gotten something out of them. I remember my mom telling me about this book of photos from the Vietnam War at her parents' house, including that famous one of a soldier holding a severed head. That didn't make sense to me, and I really wanted to see it. So she just showed it to me. It didn't scare me, but after I'd looked at it I never wanted to see that book again. Showing it to me once was fine; showing it to me a second time, after I didn't want to see it, is where some line could have been crossed. My parents never crossed it.

FILMMAKER: Were you always clear about the "real" story behind the fantastic story that Will tells about Myles' mother?

LOWERY: It was always pretty vague; she was gone and that was that.


FILMAKER: You really like to tell stories involving children and childhood. Can you talk about the appeal of those stories?

LOWERY: I'm sure it has something to do with growing up in a family of nine kids; I was the oldest, and there was always someone younger to keep me rooted in the particulars of childhood. I guess it's maybe coming to an end now, because my youngest sister just turned twelve and I just turned thirty, but at the same time I don't feel like I'm getting any older.

FILMMAKER: Would you say you had a happy childhood?

LOWERY: Yeah, for sure.

FILMMAKER: The sound design of the film is subtle but slowly creeps in, grows, and becomes more subjective and expressionistic as we get deeper into the story. Can you talk about creating a sound design that expresses an emotional — and perhaps not objective — reality?



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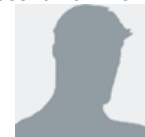
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LOWERY: Definitely. Even though we knew we were never going to leave the room, we wanted to augment the reality of the story and get into Myles' imagination. The sound design was a way to make that little bedroom bigger. It really starts about halfway through the film, right when you're really getting caught up in the story. At first we were just going to use sound effects — horses and trains and fire and such — but after we finished the first cut, a lot of people really encouraged us to experiment with music too. My friend Daniel Hart, who composed music for *St. Nick*, wrote the score for this, and the idea for it was to just let it build and build whenever we were on Myles' POV and then have it dissipate whenever he'd interrupt — until the end, when the mood and the music just takes over and carries us through the end.

FILMMAKER: *Pioneer* is lovely to look at. Just...warm. Can you talk about how you created that look?

LOWERY: I wanted the movie to look sort of like a hug. David Blood, our DP, did some lighting tests beforehand with these really bold yellow gels, and we both just loved how saturated and warm they made the light, even though the picture itself has so much darkness to it. I've worked with David on some commercial projects, and he shot some of those SXSW trailers I directed last year. He's an amazing cinematographer, and is always after this sort of gilded perfection, without any rough edges. After specializing in more raggedy films for so long, I wanted to make something that just looked perfect, so we made sure he had all the equipment he needed at his disposal, and almost enough time to use it all.

FILMMAKER: How do you plan on spending your time at Sundance? Will you have time to see other films? Any films that you're really looking forward to?

LOWERY: I'm just winging it. It's nice to have made a film whose sole purpose is to be enjoyed, you know? We're not trying to sell it. All the screenings are already sold out, so I feel like our work is done. It's not, of course, but I'm just enjoying this lack of pressure. We've got tickets to a few movies already, and I'll definitely be trying to see as many as possible. I'm really excited about *Take Shelter*, *Septien*, and *The Catechism Cataclysm*. Jessica Oreck, who made *Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo* has a new short that I'm definitely looking forward to. I'm nerdily excited about the NY Times doc. I love wandering into things without knowing anything about them, so I'm sure my favorite movies aren't even on my radar yet.

FILMMAKER: Do you know what the next film you're going to make will be? And...short or feature?

LOWERY: I'm planning to shoot a new feature next fall, once the weather starts getting cold again. It used to be an action movie.

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