

BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD

Any day now, the fabric of the universe is gonna come undone.
The ice caps is 'gonna melt, the water's 'gonna rise, and everything
south of the levee's going under.

The Bathtub, Louisiana, USA

In a forgotten but defiant bayou community cut off from the rest of the world by a sprawling levee, a six-year-old girl exists on the brink of orphanhood. Buoyed by her childish optimism and extraordinary imagination, she believes that the natural order is in balance with the universe until a fierce storm changes her reality. Desperate to repair the structure of her world in order to save her ailing father and sinking home, this tiny hero must learn to survive unstoppable catastrophes of epic proportions.

Fox Searchlight Pictures presents, in association with Cinereach, a Cinereach and Court 13 Production, in association with Journeyman Pictures, BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD starring Quvenzhané Wallis and Dwight Henry. The film is directed by Benh Zeitlin and screenplay by Lucy Alibar & Benh Zeitlin based on the stage play *Juicy and Delicious* written by Lucy Alibar. The producers are Michael Gottwald, Dan Janvey & Josh Penn. The executive producers are Philipp Engelhorn, Michael Raisler and Paul Mezey with Matthew Parker and Chris Carroll as co-producers. The creative team includes director of photography Ben Richardson, production designer Alex DiGerlando, edited by Crockett Doob and Affonso Gonçalves, music by Dan Romer & Benh Zeitlin and costume designer Stephani Lewis.

Director's Statement

Someone's ability to bake doughnuts or laugh loud is just as good a reason to make them a dolly grip as their ability to push a dolly. I want to fill my life and my films with wild, brave, good-hearted people. Whatever amount of chaos and disaster that leads to doesn't matter, because you're going through it with the people you love, and in the end, no matter what, the movies come out wild, brave, and good-hearted; and that's more important to me than smooth dolly moves.

This concept extended to every part of the process making *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. My approach to making movies is about crafting an energy, a feeling, and a way of life that the people that make movies with me can live. It's about inventing a reality and populating it with the best people I know.

Most gloriously, in our casting process – where we chose Dwight Henry, from the bakery across the street, and Quvenzhané Wallis, from Honduras Elementary School to take charge of our heroes, Wink and Hushpuppy. Neither of them had any previous experience acting, but when you look in their eyes, you see fearless warriors, and you know they can do anything. Even though you then revise the script as you learn from the actors and settings along the way and change everything about your approach, it doesn't matter, because those elements were superficial in the face of accurately capturing the fierce spirit that the film needed to articulate. That principle was applied to every decision. Are we going to create an interior water set? Or are we going to sea? Do we dress an accessible location to look like an island at the edge of the world, or do we go to the edge of the world? Do we dress an 11 year-old to look like she's six? Or do we cast a six year-old? We tested the strength of the story and family that made it against every element that would try to break it.

I got hooked on South Louisiana because this mentality is everywhere. I showed up for a short visit six years ago and I've been there ever since. It's the home of the most tenacious people in America – an endangered species. And that fierceness was how I came to this story. With the hurricanes, the oil spills, the land decaying out from under our feet, there's a sense of inevitability that one day it's all going to get wiped off the map. I wanted to make a movie exploring how we should respond to such a death sentence. Not critiquing the politicians who have caused it, or calling to arms for environmental responsibility, or raising awareness of suffering, or any of that.

The real question to me, is how do you find the strength to stand by and watch the place that made you die, while maintaining the hope and the joy and the celebratory spirit that defined it? I found the answers in the ferocious people I cast in the film, and I found an incredible articulation of that story in my dear wonderful friend and co-writer Lucy Alibar's play "Juicy and Delicious" -- an apocalyptic comedy about a little boy losing his father at the end of the world. From the two of us, and with the spirit of Quvenzhané Wallis, came Hushpuppy. She's a little beast who, in order to survive, has to find the strength of South Louisiana at the age of six. I put all the wisdom and courage I've got into her. She's the person I want to be.

-- *Benh Zeitlin*

Director/Co-writer, BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

*“They gonna know: that once there was a Hushpuppy,
and she lived with her Daddy in the Bathtub.”*

A spellbinding adventure set just past the known edges of the American Bayou, BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD follows a girl named Hushpuppy as she takes on rising waters, a sinking village, changing times, an army of prehistoric creatures and an unraveling universe that she bravely tries to stitch back together through the sheer force of spirit and resilience.

The film, shot on location in the coastal parishes of Louisiana with local non-actors in the lead roles, came to the Sundance Film Festival a hand-made, fiercely imaginative underdog and left a runaway hit and winner of the coveted Grand Jury Prize as well as the Excellence in Cinematography Award. By the time that happened, the fictional “Bathtub” – a fantastical bayou neverland inspired by real Southern Louisiana communities where people persist against all odds to revel in life, no matter what comes – had taken on a life of its own in the hearts of many, unfolding with all the indescribable sights and untamed emotions of a dream in progress.

Much like Hushpuppy’s survival in the midst of raging storms, both in the sky and her heart, the whole enterprise of BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD began as a pipe dream that became possible only through the commitment of a strongly united community. For director and co-writer Benh Zeitlin, who makes his feature debut after a series of award-winning shorts, including GLORY AT SEA, it started with a question that had been on his mind for a long time: why do people stay in the places they love, with the people they love, even when they know big trouble is on the way?

“Daddy says brave men don’t run from their place.”

“I’ve always been interested in holdouts,” says Benh Zeitlin. “Like why do people stay in a place that’s difficult to live in or that’s dangerous or that puts your life at risk? Why do people stand by their homes in times of disaster?”

He found those same questions lingering on the underside of playwright Lucy Alibar’s stage play, “Juicy and Delicious,” about a ten year-old Southern boy who believes that his father’s coming death will coincide with the end of the world, complete with a rampaging army of prehistoric Aurochs.

“I’ve known Lucy since we were 13 years old in playwriting camp together – and since then, I have always loved the humor in her plays and their mix of brutality and sweetness, the way her characters can be really harsh and yet, at their core, is a very heartfelt view of how people take care of each other,” he says.

“‘Juicy and Delicious’ is about a boy who feels like the whole world is collapsing when his father is dying, and I felt there was a real connection between the emotions of a child losing a father and those of a community losing their place in the world. That had a lot of resonance for me and I wanted to find a way to take that story and expand upon it.”

Once they joined forces, Zeitlin told Alibar he wanted to make the lead character a girl. Alibar recalls, “I was at a point where emotionally I could really be true to the things that we all think about -- your father, your parents dying, losing your land, being by yourself. The courage of the characters helped me have the courage to be really present and honest.”

“Benh and I had a wonderful collaboration,” continues Alibar. “Everyone has horror stories of Hollywood, but this was different because it was so far outside the system. Benh understood that this was so personal to me and a story true to my own. He came to Georgia and hung out with my dad and would just write stuff down. It meant a lot to me that he wanted to really go that deep to get to the heart of it.”

Alibar and Zeitlin began transplanting the story’s themes to the subsiding landscape of southern Louisiana — a place that prioritizes unadulterated joy and outsized appetites even as its towns fill with water and its bayou shores sink away. Zeitlin widened the film’s scope to portray the loss of place as well as person, as the slow demise of Hushpuppy’s father, Wink, finds a parallel in the demise of their beloved home: the slightly fantastical, yet hauntingly familiar, realm on the other side of the levee, known as the Bathtub. The Bathtub wasn’t quite based on any specific town, but rather it became a concentration of all the most exhilarating cultural elements of southern Louisiana in one place – all the rolling good times that stood to be taken away by the epic natural shifts going on in the region.

“That’s what the Bathtub is – it’s the place on the other side,” says Zeitlin. “It’s a place that’s been cut off and left out the same way it’s been sort of geographically chopped off of America.”

To put themselves at the front lines of what stood to be lost by these shifts, Zeitlin and Alibar collaborated on the script while residing in Pointe Aux Chenes, at the far end of the bayou where they would shoot. From there they could visit Isle de Jean Charles, a low-lying ridge of land that also lies beyond the protections of the levee system, in Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana. Isle de Jean Charles is home to a tight-knit community of about 90 people, many descendants of Cajun and Native American fishermen, who stay despite the imminent danger of floating into the Gulf of Mexico.

“It’s one of the best examples I’ve seen of tenacious people keeping a place alive,” observes Zeitlin. “There’s a tragic side to it, and yet the spirit is not at all morose. It’s so much fun to be there, and there’s great food and it’s just glorious. That whole feeling really inspired the characters and their choices to keep celebrating life and to never abandon the people and places you care about.”

As Zeitlin and Alibar began hammering out the story in a marina located literally where the road ends and the Gulf begins, the Bathtub turned into an original expression of that Louisiana ideal in which people from every conceivable walk of life all simmer in one spicy stew together.

“In the Bathtub, age doesn’t divide people, religion doesn’t divide people, money and politics don’t divide people,” notes Zeitlin. “We wanted to take all those lines between people and pull them out so there’s nothing but unity in this community. This is not a literal interpretation of any place in Louisiana, but it is definitely inspired by Louisiana because you feel that potential here.”

The inexhaustible spirit of the Bathtub gave birth to the spirit of Hushpuppy, the diminutive but mighty heroine who has to figure out how you can be fully there for the people and places you love even as they threaten to slip away. Part wild child, part ancient soul, she might have to worry about her very survival, but Hushpuppy learns to do it with an exuberance no one can take away from her.

“The Bathtub accepts people and their flaws, and it’s a non-judgmental, non-divisive place that is about people caring for each other and Hushpuppy becomes the boiled down essence of that,” says Zeitlin. “She’s the tiny folk hero who is able to go up against obstacles you can’t possibly imagine.”

Although the five bayous that extend south of Houma like fingers into the ocean – and the lifestyles of local shrimpers, crabbers and oilmen – were certainly fertile ground for their imaginations, from the outset Zeitlin and Alibar knew the Bathtub was going to be a step away from reality and more likely the realm of folk tales and fables. They were able to envision this world as the writing process overlapped with some premature location scouting. After Benh found an abandoned school bus and two rusty 15 foot oil drums in the back of Claude Bourg’s Cajun Country Stop, Hushpuppy had a home. But Zeitlin was always conscious that tying the film’s setting to any particular place or issue would diminish the impact of the story, and that removing any literal frame of reference would open it up to a wider, richer viewing experience.

By the end of their stay in the marina, Zeitlin and Alibar had spun a huge tale in an alternate universe that probably could have used the resources of a \$100 million blockbuster to build. Now they would have to tailor this giant world to a small budget -- one of many seemingly impossible challenges they tackled with gusto.

BUILDING THE BATHTUB

“I see that I’m a little piece of a big big universe, and that makes things right.”

From the beginning, BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD was not a solo effort but a community effort. Supporting Zeitlin and Alibar’s screenplay were two unusual film entities: Court 13 and Cinereach. A diverse collective of artists, animators, constructionists, editors, musicians and storytellers – with Benh Zeitlin as one of the original founders – Court 13 makes movies about unlikely communities . . . as an unlikely

community. Ever since they made a boat out of junk and sailed it on Lake Pontchartrain for Zeitlin's *GLORY AT SEA*, Court 13 has creatively engaged with the people and places of South Louisiana to create huge stories out of small parts, stories that transcend reality but are built of real people living in unreal circumstances.

Court 13 is made up of people drawn to the adventure of filmmaking who could not resist making *BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD* their first full-length feature. "Benh has very strong convictions as a filmmaker, and we operated according to principle of letting those convictions play out," says producer Michael Gottwald. "Court 13's impulse is to take on challenges when they seem almost undoable or impossible."

Adds producer Dan Janvey: "Benh has a way of seeing the world that's unique and everything fits into his incredible ability to tell stories. Which allows the rest of us to go on meaningful adventures to tell them."

Southern Louisiana played a big part in the way that they worked together. "There's a freedom to being here that's really conducive to the way we make films," explains Janvey. "That freedom is reflected both in the Bathtub community and in the community that made the film."

When Cinereach, a non-profit film foundation and production company came on board, they shared in Court 13's philosophy of taking cinematic challenges as opportunities instead of obstacles. "*BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD* was the perfect fit for us, exactly what we've wanted to do – a project that under most other circumstances wouldn't have gotten made," says Cinereach founder Philipp Engelhorn. "The team at Court 13 and especially Benh Zeitlin impressed us so much, we felt this was a leap of faith we needed to take."

Adds Cinereach's creative director Michael Raisler: "What's exciting about what we've been able to do is to say 'let's responsibly pursue the extraordinary.' We didn't have a lot of money for this movie and we were respectful of that framework. So you take risks, but make the most of the resources you have."

Presiding as minister over the tight union between Court 13 and Cinereach was Journeyman Pictures' Paul Mezey. "I came on board to harness the energy and excitement of all these different parties and help get a project that seemed in some ways completely impossible," says Mezey. "It was important to embrace the creative chaos, but also create some structure around it, so the whole ship wouldn't sink. That was a tricky balancing act in unexplored territory."

Another level of support came when the film was accepted to the Sundance Institutes Screenwriters Lab, Directors Lab and Producers Lab, which gave Alibar and Zeitlin the ground for their creative ideas to blossom and turn into an executable plan, a rare accomplishment for any film. The final blessings came in the form of a grant of grip truck of equipment from Rooftop Films and the Sundance/NHK International Filmmakers Award for Zeitlin.

CASTING THE BATHTUB

“Me and my daddy, we stay right here. We who the earth is for.”

Outsized as the scope of the film might be, it all hinged on the singular, curious creature named Hushpuppy. The film’s success would weigh entirely on finding someone to fill this character’s tiny yet simultaneously massive shoes. And that was the first impossibility encountered: what child could conceivably carry this considerable fable on her diminutive shoulders?

The search began in early 2009 in New Orleans, in an abandoned classroom set up as an audition space, where so many talented kids were found that Court 13 actually began an after school program to teach them acting and filmmaking. Sessions with kids of all ages played out more like interviews and game-playing than traditional auditions – but they still could not find the purity of performance needed for Hushpuppy.

After four months without a Hushpuppy, the operation expanded beyond the city into the bayou communities where the film would eventually be shot. Ultimately stretching into eight parishes in the span of a year, Court 13’s volunteer casting army canvassed towns, passed out flyers, and combed through bowling alleys, congregations and classrooms; in some areas they even went door to door, holding auditions at libraries, community centers or on-site at schools.

4,000 girls later, the hard work paid off and they had themselves a Hushpuppy, who emerged right from the film’s backyard of Houma, Louisiana. She wasn’t between the age of six to nine – she was just five years old when she first auditioned. Clearly endowed with a striking imagination, Quvenzhané Wallis was a micro force of nature with unparalleled focus and emotional intelligence.

“Our mantra was to look for a combination of imagination, fierceness and creativity – for someone with the resolve to stick up for herself but also the capacity to wonder about the world,” recalls Michael Gottwald. “Quvenzhané’s first audition showed that she had the imagination, and then it took a second round to figure out she also had that fierceness.”

“Her resonance in the quiet moments was unparalleled to anyone else – no one had come close to that,” adds Zeitlin. “The look in her eyes and the intensity and amount of feeling you could see going on inside was so powerful. She had this huge will of her own that I couldn’t control.”

It was so big that it in fact influenced the very trajectory of Hushpuppy. “Quvenzhané has this incredibly strong sense of right and wrong, and that wasn’t in the character to begin with. That was something she brought to the character. When I saw that in her, I started to think about how powerful it could be, and Hushpuppy now leads the moral charge in the movie,” says the director. “She’s the moral backbone, even though everyone else is older. She always does the right thing, and never wavers.”

Zeitlin found that working with someone so young, yet so uncompromising, was one of the more intriguing of his myriad challenges. “It was good for me because I knew that if the set wasn’t fun, if she

wasn't having fun, she wouldn't be able to act," he notes. "If I was nervous, she would sense it immediately and shut down. So it was a real lesson for me to stop being stressed-out. And I saved any moment of relaxation on the set for her because I knew that's what she needed."

Watching Quvenzhané tackle all that Hushpuppy goes through was a revelation for everyone. "A lot of people told us coming into this that we should cast an older child, but one of the central things we wanted was to actually see a young child faced with these circumstances," says Janvey. "It's one of my favorite things about the movie – she goes through this extraordinary set of circumstances with incredible bravery. Quvenzhané has that same courage Hushpuppy has."

"Daddy says if he ever got so old he couldn't drink beer, or catch catfish, that I had to put him in a boat, and set him on fire, so no one can come plug him into the wall."

The next mission was to find Hushpuppy's father, Wink. The audition process for adults was similar to that for kids – centering on their personal stories. Again, the focus was on the local people who had never acted before but were compelled by a flyer in a barbershop or an announcement on local radio. When Zeitlin reviewed the tapes recorded by Court 13's volunteer audition squad, he was taken by a man with a one-of-a-kind smile: Dwight Henry, aka Mr. Henry, known for his mouth-watering bakery across the street from the abandoned school where the team held auditions who asked if he could audition after a flyer was put up in his bakery.

Mr. Henry barely acted on his audition tape. Instead, he spun a tapestry of incredible stories about post-Katrina New Orleans and his resilience in keeping his bakery going. Six months later, desperate to secure him for a callback, the team found him nearly impossible to lock in. Finally, they realized the problem: they were calling in the afternoon, but he worked from midnight to noon – baker's hours – so they were calling during the only time he had to sleep. Once he did come in for a follow-up audition, he demonstrated a potent emotional vulnerability and commanding screen presence. Zeitlin and the team had initially thought that the role might merit a trained professional . . . but never ones to take the easy way out, they went with Mr. Henry.

"He's someone who has survived things and gone through things that require enormous internal strength and bravery," comments Zeitlin. "He had this incredibly strong side to him and we needed that for the beginning of the film, for him to be this kind of scary, reckless force to Hushpuppy. He's a really good actor, and he's fearless. Nothing embarrasses him, nothing makes him feel self-conscious. He'll try anything and I knew that Dwight's big heart would always be in the character no matter what I asked him to do."

To accommodate Mr. Henry's schedule, Zeitlin held rehearsals with him in the bakery, from 2 to 5 in the morning, as he prepared the day's scrumptious goods. "I realized that Dwight felt the same way about his bakery as I felt about the film and we could understand each other on that level," says Zeitlin. "I would use the bakery as an emotional tool, asking him how he'd feel if they came to shut it down."

Mr. Henry, who says he “never in a million years believed” that he would be the star of a film, didn’t know what to expect from those sessions at the bakery. “Benh and I would talk about a lot of things in getting to know each other,” he remembers. “I couldn’t understand why we talked about a lot of these different things until the movie was starting to shoot and then I understood why we talked about my whole life – my mother, my father, my grandparents, my children, my schooling, every part of my life from the time I was born until now. Some of the things we talked about he put into the character, and he used some them to get me to react. He wanted real emotions. He didn’t want to use onions to make you look emotional. He got real, real emotions out of me.”

Mr. Henry soon made the role very much his own. “The character of Wink took a significant change with Mr. Henry, because he brings a lot of himself to it,” observes Gottwald. “They have a lot of commonalities in terms of what they’ve been through.”

Observes Mr. Henry: “Wink is a leader. When something needs to be done in the town, everybody looks to Wink to save the day. Go ask Wink. And I’m the same way. When something needs to be done at the bakery, everybody comes to me. Wink is trying to help the people of the Bathtub survive. He has a certain love for that town and I have the same love for my town. . . he refuses to walk away, just like I refused to walk away from my business after Katrina.”

Another area where Mr. Henry and Wink connected was fatherhood – as Mr. Henry is a father to young girl as well. “I have a daughter Hushpuppy’s age and I go through these same things on a daily basis, trying to teach my daughter how to make it, to be self-sufficient and independent,” he says. “I want her to be able to survive on her own and that’s what Wink wants Hushpuppy to learn.”

Working with Quvenzhané came naturally. “It was a tremendous experience working with a six-year-old girl with so much talent. I mean it was amazing some of the things that we used to sit down and talk about,” he muses. “She is very bright and very advanced for her age.”

These days, Mr. Henry is still baking but he has become an even more recognized local hero in the wake of media surrounding the film’s award-winning debut at Sundance, with people coming into his bakery not just for the pastries, but for his autograph. Most of all, though, Mr. Henry is gratified by the attention the film is bringing to an endangered way of life in Louisiana.

“In the film, I think you see that we are natural survivors down here,” he sums up. “We have to go through certain things, like hurricanes, and wonder: Do we pack up? Do we leave? How are we going to make it? But we are so tough-minded and resilient that nothing will take us away.”

The rest of the adult cast, most playing their own colorfully individual variations on those resilient and tough Bathtub residents, were rounded out by locals from New Orleans and the bayou, and complemented by some of the key players from GLORY AT SEA.

Among the Bathtub residents is Miss Bathsheeba, at once a teacher, medicine woman and caretaker to Hushpuppy, played by Gina Montana, local Mardi Gras Indian royalty. Montana summarizes how Zeitlin worked with each person to sync their personalities to the characters: “Benh is a director who really digs deep. There were parts of my personality that I’ve kept hidden . . . and at first I was kind of reluctant to show the wildness that Bathsheeba has but then I just opened up and it became natural. Benh tapped into that part of my personality. I got to a point where I told Benh point-blank: I don’t know about acting the part, I’m just going to wear her skin.”

In Zeitlin’s view, the play and script provided a solid blueprint for the actors to raise up the house. “The actors were all collaborators on the language that’s in the film and the ways the parts are played. We poured the words through the actors like a sieve and they made it real.”

CREATING THE AUROCHS

“Way back in the day, the Aurochs was king of the world.”

With the cast falling into place and most learning how to act on film for the first time, another unexpected set of performers had to be wrangled: the mystery-laden creatures known to historians and scientists as Aurochs. The conceit of the film’s mythology was that a phalanx of these pre-historic beasts – known to modern humans only from haunting Paleolithic cave etchings – were frozen in glaciers long ago, and are suddenly thawed and resurrected by the massive climate shifts taking place in the Bathtub.

“The Aurochs came from Lucy’s play and they have a lot of importance; I think they are literally the harbinger of death,” explains Zeitlin. “They are getting closer and closer to the Bathtub and to Wink. But what really interested me about them is that Hushpuppy’s experience is that at first she thinks they are coming to get her but then she comes to realize they are not going to destroy her. By the end of the film, these humongous, fierce creatures are something that she relates to.”

Still, the question remained: How do you create a parade of monsters that herald the impending apocalypse on a less than monstrous budget? As Zeitlin’s crew gathered in the bayou, a special effects unit based in New Orleans – under the direction of Court 13’s co-founder and promising young filmmaker in his own right, Ray Tintori – had to find the answer.

Zeitlin did not want a technologically driven solution. “There’s no technology, no computers in the Bathtub so we didn’t want to create synthetic creatures,” he says. “They had to feel fully alive, so we decided very early on like we’re going to somehow use live animals to create this effect . . . as you get closer you realize there is a warm beating heart inside every single element of the film, and I wanted that to carry over to the Aurochs.”

Ultimately, inspired by Alibar's pet Vietnamese Pot-Bellied Pig, young swine underwent a carefully handcrafted transformation into something evocative of the most primal fears and emotions, as Tintori integrated the thundering Aurochs organically into the film's fabric.

The scene played out in an abandoned firehouse in the Marigny neighborhood of New Orleans. Here, the Aurochs' living, breathing surrogates were decked in tailor-made headdresses, specially designed to endow them with fearsome horns and shaggy hair, and roamed amongst meticulous Ice Age sets. Certain green screen shots even called for a conveyor belt surface for the mangy mammals to trot along, an apparatus operated by a crew member on an exercise bike.

It all was typical of the can-do, resourceful, innovative spirit that infected the crew and the way elements of the natural world constantly played a role in that. Says Michael Gottwald: "Benh had worked in stop-motion animation so he was used to working with small things, but I don't think anything prepared him for working with wild animals."

Nevertheless, the impact was achieved. "All of the stuff that's going on for Hushpuppy basically manifests itself in the Aurochs," Gottwald summarizes. "I think that's another thing that separates this story from other tales. Instead of having the Aurochs exist in a dream world, the ideas in Hushpuppy's head are made real and you see them charging across the screen."

DESIGNING THE BATHTUB

"When it all goes quit behind my eyes I see everything that made me flying around in invisible pieces."

The Bathtub is not like anywhere on earth, and yet it also feels like a real place you could visit right now, if you were willing to step just off the edge of the map. To create a distinct concoction of the true and the surreal, the gritty and the magic-tinged, the filmmakers brought together a team of artisans who were as committed to getting to the heart of the Bathtub as the actors were to getting inside the characters. "It was a huge army of people strapping things together with string and trying to build things the way that people would in the Bathtub," describes Benh Zeitlin.

The brigade was a peculiar hybrid of Louisiana locals, independent film world professionals and friends of friends just up for an escapade. By the end of pre-production, there were more than 80 crew members – half in the Art Department alone – all scattered in housing along the bayous.

"Everyone who joined the production did so because they wanted to go on an adventure making this film," comments Dan Janvey. "That was pretty universal . . . and it shows itself in every detail; there's so much in the film that is lovingly crafted."

In January 2010, production moved to the bayou town of Montegut, Louisiana, on the property formerly known as Claude Bourg's Cajun Country Stop & Pumping Station. A diamond in the mud, this

property suited the film's needs perfectly; and as it turns out, one third of the movie would end up being shot in Claude's backyard, which became the scene of Hushpuppy and Wink's ramshackle compound. Here, production designer Alex DiGerlando led the team that forged father and daughter's uniquely situated shacks – Wink's atop the abandoned school bus on Bourg's property – harnessing the whole of the natural world, replete with pigs, dogs, ducks and chickens, into their fragile but fiercely loved home.

“It was a combination of taking what was already there and adding to it to create a more hyper-real place,” says Michael Gottwald. “This surreal fantasy world is created from things that exist.”

To that end, DiGerlando found himself endlessly inspired by the production's surroundings. “You can't not be inspired in this area,” he states. “You see things your imagination could never conjure. So much of what we saw on a daily basis found its way into the fabric of the movie's design. What's interesting is that when people see the movie, they think the Bathtub is a real place. The places we shot mirror the Bathtub and all these elements that are scattered throughout Southern Louisiana – but then we distilled it into our own mythic version.”

One of the biggest dilemmas for DiGerlando was how to show the evolution of the Bathtub before, during and after the coming of the flood that remakes the world. He solved it by creating in triplicates. “Pretty much every major set in the movie you see in three phases,” DiGerlando explains. “The Bathtub at the beginning of the movie is paradise on earth. Then you see it after the storm when water's up to the ceiling and then you see it after the levee's been exploded and all the houses are in disrepair. So the way we achieved that is we found a swamp on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain and we transplanted parts of our set and built them half way sticking out of the water. And then the destroyed version of the Bathtub was shot in Isle De Jean Charles, a place that is actually sinking so a lot of homes and fishing camps are already totally destroyed. We made slight modifications, but we just sort of honored the beauty of the way those things naturally are.”

Every item in the interior of Hushpuppy and Wink's respective home was reflective of character, but perhaps their most important possession would be their makeshift notion of a family boat, the whimsical design of which came to Zeitlin through a minor catastrophe.

“We were struggling with what Hushpuppy and Wink's boat would be,” recalls Zeitlin, “when one day we were driving my old Chevy truck down to the bayou and when we got out of it, it exploded behind us in a ball of flame. We were sitting there looking at the fire, and thought, ‘If this happened to Wink, what would he do with this shell of a vehicle? He would just cut the back off, stick some barrels under it and that's your boat.’ And so that's what we did. We tried to react to it the way that the characters would. Then we had this amazing 18-year-old whiz kid boat engineer, Dan Gladstone, who came down here and figured out how to get that truck bed floating.”

The art department's crown jewel was another floating wonder – a giant school boat-cum-warship bearing grand wooden stakes, which sat for weeks in the bayou, bewildering locals.

“It’s a real testament to the art department that the film feels so natural,” sums up Janvey. “It’s a completely made-up universe, but it draws from elements of real life, pushing them into a mythological or folkloric place that’s removed from reality, yet feels familiar.”

That same hybrid of true-life and magical realism infuses the dynamic photography of Ben Richardson, who shot the film using handheld, Super 16mm cameras and subsequently took home the Cinematography Prize from the Sundance Film Festival.

Zeitlin says Richardson exhibited just the quality needed – fearlessness. “Lot of DP’s told us, ‘this cannot be done, there’s no way to shoot this film.’ And it dawned on me we needed someone who wouldn’t be afraid and Ben had shown that when he shot part of GLORY AT SEA,” explains the director. “He came out with a little Handicam and shot the animals around Claude’s property, then gave me this tape and was like, ‘I think this is what you want your film to look like . . . and I think we can do this.’ And I watched it and said, ‘Yep that is what we want it to be.’”

Producer Janvey was impressed with how Richardson immersed himself in Hushpuppy’s knee-high viewpoint. “You travel through the movie through her eyes and it’s very much related to how they positioned and moved the camera. You see the world through Hushpuppy’s POV.”

Says Richardson: “I always knew Hushpuppy’s perspective on the world was going to inform everything about the camera work and the environment. My job with Quvenzhané was to keep up with her. There were a lot of things I was sort of internally processing and quietly adjusting for so that we always had this sense of her as this sort of strong little individual. That translated into things like tiny differences in camera height and in angle. I found that if you captured her from certain angles and in certain ways you could just really make her the strongest, proudest, little being in the movie.”

Shooting out in the Louisiana elements also meant working around an omnipresent sun. “I had to find ways to pick the right times of day and the right set of angles to create the different moods and atmospheres of the movie. One of the biggest achievements for me is that we managed to control these natural environments and make the arc of the movie work at the same time. We got lucky on a few occasions, but I like to think if you prepare enough, luck comes and finds you,” says Richardson.

The aquatic nature of the production was another obstacle that the team relished pushing past. “I can’t even tell you how many shots in BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD involve multiple boats, people underwater while the shot’s happening, handing things to people above water,” notes Janvey. “It’s a testament to the film that when you watch it, you don’t notice that aspect of it.”

FINISHING THE BATHTUB: EDITING AND SCORE

"They think we all gonna drown down here but we ain't going nowhere."

Principal photography began on April 20th, 2010, a date better known in Louisiana for what also happened that day: the disastrous BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, just miles southeast of the film's bayou home. The initial explosion killed 11 men and oil flowed underwater for 3 months, resulting in the worst petroleum accident in history.

The coming disaster, just as Hushpuppy is wrestling with her own series of storms and natural destruction, was almost dizzying in its parallels – but the concern was for the local population and wildlife. "The oil started slowly spilling and it felt like the coming of the Aurochs," recalls Benh Zeitlin. "This area had become a kind of home to us and it was really scary for the town. There was talk that there might be no fishing for 10 years – which thank God didn't happen – and a feeling the area could disappear. At one point, BP took over the whole marina and we had to negotiate with them to get our boats behind their booms. We had all the Aurochs swimming in the water, and it felt like we were living the movie."

The production forged on, but in addition to altering locations and logistics, the oil spill became a looming presence that amplified the film's themes of resilience in the face of epic uncertainty and change. Says Lucy Alibar: "Nobody could ever really give us a logical answer as to why people stayed after the storm, which to me is the most important thing, because the real logic to it is that they would say, 'It's my home. It's me. How can I leave me? I can't just leave my heart.'"

Beyond the oil spill, every day in the bayou posed its own titanic struggle against the elements: days were long, the air was thick, the boats would break, the kids were cranky, Wink threw out his voice, the food was debilitatingly delicious. The Court 13 mantra of making do out of what's around you proved key. But the thing keeping the whole ship afloat was the perseverance and spirit of a tiny six year-old. She passed the test of the film shoot with flying colors, and then asked for more.

When the eventful production wrapped, Zeitlin and his editors Crockett Doob and Affonso Gonçalves (HBO's "Mildred Pierce") had a mountain of footage to get through. For months upon months the task was paring an enormous assembly cut down into a film that told the story most effectively.

Gonçalves says that it was Hushpuppy who opened the creative process to add up to even more than the sum of the film's parts. "Hushpuppy's imagination is so vivid, I was able to jump around through time and place and ideas. We built everything on her voice, on her thinking about life."

He and Zeitlin worked feverishly structuring and restructuring until there was an organic thread from beginning to end. "To this day, every time I watch the film, I'm moved," says Gonçalves. "It's an experience so unique. We worked so hard on just the first ten minutes of the film so that it would be this blast of life, of energy, of love and emotions, and that carries through the film."

Meanwhile, the film secured the San Francisco Film Society's Kenneth Rainin Foundation post-production grant, which led to enlisting a class of Bay Area visual effects students to integrate the Aurochs footage. With some serious believers at the Film Society, the film won the grant again in the second year of post-production, through which it was able to partner with Skywalker Labs for sound work.

The final creative element that went into BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD was its haunting, pulsing score – an original mélange of Cajun and orchestral influences composed by Dan Romer along with Benh Zeitlin – which was designed to be every bit as transporting as the visuals. “Benh has always composed with Dan; they wrote the score for GLORY AT SEA and for Ray Tintori's short DEATH TO THE TIN MAN,” explains Gottwald. “When they come together, they create something that is a product of both, not one or the other.”

Romer explains of their unique collaboration: “Benh kind of writes half the melodies, I write half the melodies and then we get together and he takes care of the story telling element more and I take care of the sonic and harmonic and theoretical aspects of it.”

They started out by searching for a Cajun band that could create the particular sound of the Bathtub, full of both verve and tradition – and they found that in the Lost Bayou Ramblers, a local legendary, Grammy®-nominated group from Pilette, Louisiana who combine the heritage music of their native Southern Louisiana with contemporary twists of rockabilly, punk and swing.

“We knew we wanted to have a Cajun band interwoven with the score,” explains Romer. “In the very first scene, we had the idea of using the beautiful song ‘Balza Waltz,’ then re-harmonize it with orchestral instruments to take it into another realm. We went down to Lafayette to record the Lost Bayou Ramblers doing it and it was incredible. The singer came in and I thought he was the assistant engineer, he looked so young. But then he opened his mouth and he has this big, gruff voice. They were amazing.”

The next big musical question for Romer and Zeitlin was, when Hushpuppy opened the peculiar music box of her world for the audience, what was the melody that would come out? They found an answer using a web of diverse folk and classical influences -- and captured the tune of the Bathtub's young hero becoming a warrior. It became just as important to Zeitlin that the music feel like it was emerging from Hushpuppy's spirit, as it was that the camerawork and design be from a child's-eye point of view.

“We found that if we tried to score from anyone other than Hushpuppy's point of view, it was a complete failure,” Romer explains. “So everything was about how is Hushpuppy seeing this scene? How is that affecting her? What kind of music displays those emotions? That made it very succinct.”

Romer notes that that the music is often in the foreground of the scene, woven through only with Hushpuppy's narration, and in that way becomes a big strand of the storytelling. “Background music is not really Benh's and my thing,” he says. “I think Benh intentionally leaves parts of the film for music to fill in.

And that's a great way to work – to think that a piece of art isn't complete until every single creative part is there. If the film made sense without the music, then the music would be superfluous.”

The score was recorded with just one instrument at a time with a small chamber orchestra, but the biggest challenge turned out to be one of the more unusual instruments called for: a celesta keyboard, a piano-like wooden box that produces resonant bell tones, perhaps best known for its use in Tchaikovsky's “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy” and more recently used on both of pop singers Adele's hit albums.

“It was impossible to find one at first,” Romer recalls, “and at the end of the day I said ‘Benh, I think we're just going to have to use an electronic celesta.’ He said ‘No, we have to find a real one. It's pivotal to the film.’ So we ended up renting a celesta. It's like a \$40,000 instrument and we could only have it for a day. So I played it for 18 hours straight to record the entire score. Benh is very serious about the way he wants things to sound.”

At least 80 of the film's cast and crew traveled, 25 of them via caravan from Louisiana, to Utah for the films premiere at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival, where Hushpuppy, Wink and all the rest of the Bathtub were introduced to audiences for the first time. The sheer extent of the personal reactions in turn moved the filmmakers.

Dan Janvey encapsulates the team's feeling: “At the first screenings, everyone's emotional experience seemed to come through things that meant something to them personally. I'm hoping the wide range of reactions continue in terms of how the film speaks to what is are happening in people's lives now . . . Benh always conceived of this as a populist film that you could have fun with and also take an emotional journey with. And that's what has happened so far.”

In the end, the production's challenges became the fuel that propelled the film's abiding sense of creativity and humanity. “The production was certainly chaotic, but it was the kind of thing where at the end, you knew you would come out of it and be the better for it,” summarizes Gottwald.

Says Zeitlin: “If you look at the big picture - - the film is a response to something tragic and inspired me in creating BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD. If you take circumstances that happen and don't abandon the things that made you, the place that you are from and the people you care about, it is only then that you are truly able to celebrate life.”

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Five Questions with *Beasts of the Southern Wild* Director Benh Zeitlin

By Alexandra Byer
Filmmaker Magazine
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Pushing the boundaries of traditional filmmaking, Benh Zeitlin stands by his decision to make movies involving children, animals, and somewhat fantastical locations and environments. Lauded for his short, *Glory at Sea*, Zeitlin attends Sundance this year with his first feature-length film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Like Zeitlin's short, his feature debut takes place in Louisiana and aims to capture identifiable human emotions through the journey of a young girl. *Beasts* proves to be a seemingly mysterious narrative, unidentifiable from its abstract synopsis, but its premiere today in U.S. Dramatic Competition will soon shed more understanding on this highly anticipated film.

Filmmaker: What was the process of moving from a short film to a feature-length film like for you?

Zeitlin: It's kind of like getting hit in the head in a boxing match. You're looking for your brain and it just doesn't work like it's supposed to. A short you can keep all in your head all at once. A feature, or a least this one, has this chaotic mystery to it, where you plan as much as you can before you start, but we set up so many

unpredictable elements in our shoot that you can only really think moment to moment, things are happening faster than you can control them. So each day you just run out there and try not get killed, it's a thrill.

Filmmaker: How do you think audiences will react to this somewhat mystical world you have created?

Zeitlin: I think they're going to recognize it. Because the film, to me, is a piece of realism. The characters, and the emotions, and the aesthetic are all rooted in real people, places, and events. And the elements that are 'mystical' are really exaggerations of actual things, the way you can look at something and feel more for it that is actually there, those hyperaware moments are expressed on screen, but the ground is the same ground everyone walks on.

Filmmaker: You mentioned in another interview that you have found yourself using all the things you were taught not to when making a film – children, animals, and the ocean. You are clearly unafraid of such filmmaking "rules." Now that you have completed the film, do you still feel so courageous? Are you happy you did not limit yourself to these statutes?

Zeitlin: Absolutely. Whatever impact they have on the film, and however unpredictable the shoot became, on a day-to-day basis, that's how I want to spend my life. If I couldn't make films I would still be building boats and packing them with animals and children. The movie comes second to that adventure.

Filmmaker: What is the tone of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*? Who is this film for?

Zeitlin: The film is for everyone. The movie's weird, because we made the it in a way that no one else would really be stupid enough to try, but, I know that the feelings it's trading in are universal. It's all about hope, glory, courage, wisdom, in the face of loosing the people and places that made you. It's not a brooding, mopey, art film. Even though it has this folkloric poetic-ness that you don't generally get in the AMC palace, the AMC palace is deeply present in the energy of the movie. People from both sides of the multiplex / art house line are going to relate to it.

Filmmaker: How has your relationship with Louisiana changed over the time you have been making films there?

Zeitlin: Me and Louisiana are involved in a epic romance that has spiraled completely out of control. I was supposed to get home in October 2006 and that obviously hasn't happened. It was like I showed up to have a brief affair and now have spawned 7 families or something. We've got these compounds full of animals, junk boats stored everywhere, my friends, my family have come down, I'm stuck. I think it's the only place in America where real freedom still exists. You can do what you wanna, and working the way I like to requires that, so, me and Louisiana are gonna stick together and see what happens.