

Education Events: Education Resource

BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD

Dir Benh Zeitlin | USA 2011 | 93 min



Synopsis

'Bathtub' is an imaginary area of Louisiana, so cut off from the surrounding area by a long wall of levees that its dirt-poor inhabitants live a wilder, gentler life, more in touch with nature and animals. Hushpuppy is a 6-year-old girl who has lived alone in a shack with her father, Wink, ever since her mother 'swam away'; it is the surrounding water, and the possibility of flood, that presents a real danger among other mythical threats beyond the boundaries of Bathtub, such as giant boar-like animals released from the Ice Age by eroding glaciers. At the core of this fable, a kind of *Where The Wild Things Are* for grown-ups, is the power and solidity of the father and daughter's relationship amid the instability of their existence, and the image of a community united within a simpler way of life.

The filmmakers

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| Director | Benh Zeitlin |
| Producers | Michael Gottwald, Dan Janvey, Josh Penn |
| Screenwriters | Lucy Alibar, Benh Zeitlin |
| Director of Photography | Ben Richardson |
| Editors | Crockett Doob, Affonso Gonçalves |
| Music | Dan Romer, Benh Zeitlin |

Benh Zeitlin was born in 1982 and brought up in Queens, New York City, by his parents Amanda Dargan and Steve Zeitlin, folklorist at City Lore: the New York Center for Urban Culture. Benh studied at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, and in 2004 cofounded the 'Court 13' independent filmmakers collective. He moved to New Orleans while making his first short film, *Glory at Sea*, in 2008. In 2012, his first feature, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, won the Caméra d'Or award at the Cannes Film Festival and The Grand Jury Prize: Dramatic at the Sundance Film Festival. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is based on a short play, *Juicy and Delicious*, by Lucy Alibar which takes from the literary traditions of Americana with a strong-willed independent child protagonist such as Huckleberry Finn. Although the film has a six-year-old protagonist, the film is targeted by the UK distributors at an adult audience.

The film was shot on 16mm film, and the director worked with 'Court 13', a small professional crew and dozens of local residents in and around Montegut, Louisiana. During her audition, 5-year-old Quvenzhané Wallis ('Hushpuppy') impressed the film-makers with her reading ability, a tremendous scream and her ability to burp on command.

Before watching the film

- Research the works of environmentalists Bjørn Lomborg and Al Gore (or two others of your choice with opposing views). What are the differing sides of the argument? Which do you agree with?
- Dwight Henry ('Wink') wasn't looking for an acting job; at the time he owned a bakery where the filmmakers would come for breaks, and put up fliers about auditions. Despite being busy with moving to larger café premises, he read for the part, and was chosen. He was perfect for the role, as he said, "I was in Hurricane Katrina in neck-high water. I have an inside understanding for what this movie is about. I brought a passion to the part that an outside actor who had never seen a storm or been in a flood or faced losing everything could have. ... I was two-years-old when Hurricane Betsy hit New Orleans and my parent had to put me on the roof of the house. An outsider couldn't have brought the passion to the role that I did."

Imagine you are a casting agent: Which list of well-known actors would you call up for audition to play Wink, and why? One of you is Wink, the other the casting agent. Have that conversation, on Wink's side debating a risky career change, on the casting agent's side persuading him the reasons why.

After watching the film

- Discuss how the themes of family, relationships, survival and food are explored in the script and represented in the production design and cinematography.
- This was Benh Zeitlen's first feature film and is in the LFF's First Feature Competition for the most original and imaginative directorial debut. Imagine you are on the Jury and write a critique on why you do or don't think it should win. You could even watch *My Brother The Devil* and compare!

Beasts of the Southern Wild and the Environment

Beasts of the Southern Wild is set on a fictional island, 'Isle de Charles Doucet', called Bathtub by its inhabitants. The environmental and social issues brought up in the film are very real – Isle de Jean Charles, which really exists in Louisiana, it is rapidly eroding, and the Terrebonne Parish is being threatened by rising tides and hurricanes which are devastating the numerous isolated fishing communities that exist there. Scientists have predicted that between 10,000 and 13,500 square kilometers of coastal lands in that area will be covered in water by 2100 due to erosion and an increase in sea-levels caused by climate change. New Orleans is a city that lies quite low, and was devastated by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 when the flood defenses, called levees, couldn't cope with the rising waters and burst. Compounding this is the Catch 22 situation of the Mississippi River's declining ability to deposit sediment due to the levees, and thus is no longer being able to compensate for the land disappearing under the rising sea. This has prompted huge controversial debate over the sustainability of low-lying areas in Louisiana; whether to move inhabitants to higher ground, or introduce a system of flood control. In the film, the Bathtub contained everything good that stood to be taken away by the epic natural shifts going on around it. The question for the character of Hushpuppy became: what responsibility and duty do you have to your home and yourself to be there for someone or something as it slips away in front of you?

Suggested further viewing

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Author Mark Twain, 1884) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Dir Michael Curtiz, USA 1960, 107min)

Where the Wild Things Are (Author Maurice Sendak, 1963) and *Where the Wild Things Are* (Dir Spike Jonze, USA 2009, 101min)

To Kill a Mocking Bird (Author Harper Lee, 1960) and *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (Dir Robert Mulligan, USA 1962, 129min). Atticus Finch, a lawyer in the Depression-era South, defends a black man against an undeserved rape charge, and his kids against prejudice.

An Inconvenient Truth (Dir Davis Guggenheim, USA 2006, 100min). A documentary on Al Gore's campaign to make the issue of global warming a recognized problem worldwide.

When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts (Dir Spike Lee, USA 2006, 255min). An examination of the U.S. government's role and its response to Hurricane Katrina.

The Wizard of Oz (Dir Victor Fleming, USA 1939, 101min). A young girl is swept away in a tornado to a magical land.