

The Last Social Taboo

Katherine Brooks throws down the gauntlet to her Facebook friends. **By Laurie K. Schenden**

Emmy Award-winning director Katherine Brooks is seated in that lavish Hollywood movie palace Grauman's Chinese Theatre, waiting to watch the world premiere of her latest film, *Face2Face*. Her mother sits next to her, wearing a grin that could fill a wide-screen. In a theater packed with friends, fans and supporters, she is a world away from the suicide attempt that inspired her to create the film.

But why would this young filmmaker, who has such an enviable career in TV and on the big screen (*Loving Annabelle*), ever try to kill herself? According to Brooks, it took a combination of events to trigger her attempted suicide: chucking her reality TV career, recovering from major surgery and feeling all alone in a town full of superficial wannabes. "I had worked on a reality show that was just really soul-sucking for me," explains Brooks, who's also directed *The Osbournes*, *The Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica*, and *The Real World*. "Between the surgery, and leaving the job I had for 10 years and suffering from depression, it was a recipe for catastrophe."

Her story provides some strong evidence that depression, which still carries a significant social stigma, is exacerbated by a dependence on social media.

It's fitting that the project began with a Facebook status update by Brooks: "I have 5,000 friends on Facebook and it's been a month since I had a hug." That was part of her motivation to hit the road to make *Face2Face*. Brooks decided to travel around the country to meet 50 of her "cyber friends" in person. What she didn't mention, until the cameras started rolling, was that this was her first step on a journey to save her own life, after downing what she thought

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was a lethal dose of pills. "As a filmmaker, I was like, 'That's something that if people could see, maybe they would think twice about doing it.'"

We see some of the actual footage of her tearful suicide attempt, which she recorded on her phone and found only when she was deleting other images during her recovery. She doesn't remember the recording, but she does know that it took guts to publicly reveal it, warts and all, and that's what Brooks does in *Face2Face*. But before she turned on the camera, she had to ask herself, "Am I willing to put that out there to the world?" In the film, we hear her agent and lawyer begging her not to include the footage, because it would be *career* suicide. It was a risk Brooks had to take.

The film is deeply personal. Brooks shares horrendous personal details that begin when she was a child in Louisiana. Adopted by alcoholics, she was molested at an early age, raped at 15 and bullied for being gay. Then, she dropped out of high school. In a final kick to the curb, she was rejected by her first crush. This woman just happens to be No.

50 of the Facebook friends—mostly strangers—she visits in *Face2Face*.

"I knew at an early age that I wanted to make movies, to be a part of making that magic happen," says Brooks the day after the premiere, sitting poolside at the Hollywood Hills home of friends. "When you grow up an only child in a small town, and you're a loner, a lot of your life lessons are learned through watching movies."

Like a lot of teens who find their way to Hollywood, Brooks got a less-than-glamorous reception in the town known for making dreams come true. "I lived in the parking lot of a pretty seedy Hollywood motel and started panhandling...I got into the wrong crowd. I did drugs from the time I was 15 until I was 21."

Even through those difficult years, Brooks didn't forget her dream. "There



Katherine Brooks (left) with Elizabeth Stevens and family

was a [Super 8] camera in a pawn shop that I wanted, so I managed to get enough money together to get it. I started shooting the kids on the street...then just started to make them into short films. "My film school was kind of my street life, you know? I never lost sight [that] my dream was to make movies, not be a drug-addict homeless kid living on the streets in Hollywood.

"I started giving tours on horseback, because I still wasn't old enough to get a real job. That's where I met somebody who actually produced films, and I showed them a lot of the footage that I shot. [They] were really impressed with it and kind of took me under their wing."

Despite its poignant origins, the film is a cathartic journey filled with upbeat and positive images; ultimately, *Face2Face* endorses the value of personal connection. Plus, Brooks' decision to throw caution to the winds and make the film is paying off—in addition to its success in theaters, she's even getting offers to turn *Face2Face* into a TV series. Needless to say, the lawyer and the agent who warned her that the material might ruin her career are no longer representing her.

Both *Loving Annabelle*, her first lesbian feature, and *Face2Face* are "projects that really come from the heart and from the soul, and aren't about money and aren't about fame. And that's why those two projects mean so much to me," Brooks explains.

"When I actually started making money, I got wrapped up in the whole lifestyle of having the best car, and a nice house, and it's about awards and money. On the outside, it looked like I was living the dream, but on the inside I was a fraud, because I compromised my own integrity as an artist, which is what made me go into such a deep depression. But I needed to learn that lesson. I needed to learn that art and the expression of the art are what motivate me, not the money and not the fame [or] awards."

Now, Brooks divides her time

between L.A. and New Orleans, and is editing *Off the Record*, her second lesbian feature film, in which she also acts. "I play a music journalist who's doing a story on a really tortured rock star. It's the story of two very tortured souls coming together and having a connection."

Doing projects that are close to her heart may hurt her career, says Brooks, "but at least I'll be doing real artistic expression. And if I have to get a job as a horseback rider [laughs], I'll just keep making my artistic projects and my gay movies myself" (face2facemovie.com) ■

DVD Picks By Rachel Shatto



Tomboy (Wolfe Video)

In *Tomboy*, the latest film from Céline Sciamma (*Water Lilies*), the lesbian director continues her exploration of burgeoning pre-adolescent sexuality and gender identity. The film follows a tomboy named Laure who, when moving to a new neighborhood, is mistaken for a boy. Rather than correct her new friends she seizes on the opportunity and reinvents herself as Mickäel. In her new persona she is able to capitalize on the privilege afforded to boys on the playground and even discovers puppy love. Delivered with an almost dreamlike quality by a talented and naturalistic young cast, the film feels incredibly intimate and nostalgic. It also successfully raises more questions than it answers about the oh-so-complex concepts of gender identity and innate sexuality.



Conceiving Family (Watershed Productions)

Is there someone in your life who believes same-sex couples shouldn't be allowed to adopt? We recommend sending them a copy of *Conceiving Family*, a documentary which follows five LGBT couples as they share their adoption stories. The film opens with the filmmakers, Amy Bohigian and Jane Byers, making the life-altering decision to start a family by adopting. We follow them through the sometimes frightening, heartbreaking and ultimately moving process of adoption which sees them facing discrimination from adoption services and the evangelical Christian foster family of the twins they hope to adopt. Along with Bohigian and Byers' tale, four other same-sex couples share their adoption experiences, both domestically and abroad.



Pretty Little Liars: The Complete Second Season (ABC Family)

This incredibly addictive show gets even more so the second time around. After the untimely death of their season one prime suspect, the girls are back where they started, trying to discover the identity of their blackmailer, the mysterious A. A's continuing shenanigans make life difficult for all the girls, none more so than Emily who is now out to everyone and is dabbling in baby dyke drama, juggling no less than three lady love interests. Non-stop plot twists and melodrama make indulging in this guilty pleasure oh-so-satisfying. Add to that the fact that Emily remains one of the most likeable and relatable lesbian characters on TV and this is an absolute lezzie must-watch. In short, we give season two an A.



The Guest House (Wolfe Video)

If you ask us, there's no such thing as too many lesbian romance films. Whether they are steamy, passionate, corny or even bittersweet, we just can't resist a lezzie love story and *The Guest House* is the latest must-have film to add to our lesbian library. The film follows the rebellious Rachel who, while staying at her father's house, meets his employee Amy who has taken up residence in the guesthouse. Rachel is a wild child and Amy is (seemingly) conservative but, despite their surface differences, the two still strike up a friendship. They spend the weekend sightseeing, getting to know one another and before they know it the bond they are developing turns romantic and the guesthouse becomes the love shack. Hot stuff.