



BUILT BY WENDY:

A Brief Interview with Harris Savides asc

By Matthew J. Lloyd, csc associate member

In the early summer of 2009, acclaimed New York fashion designer Built By Wendy commissioned a series of short films from notable young directors that would incorporate new pieces from their fall line. The only condition was to creatively include a particular Built By Wendy garment into the film. When my good friend, actor/director Kahlil Joseph, approached me with his idea for the project I was intrigued. But when he told me that the film was going to feature Harris Savides asc (*Whatever Works, Milk*) I was completely blown away.

At the time Joseph was doing some work for Sophia Coppola on her new film *Somewhere*, which Savides was shooting. While on the set, Joseph developed a close friendship with Savides's daughter Sophie, 14, who was home working as a camera PA on her summer break. Sophie is an incredibly sophisticated young lady with a magnetic personality. Over the course of the production she and Joseph became quite close and at some point it all just clicked and he said, "I am going to use them in this piece." Anyone who has spent any time around Savides and his

daughter knows how beautiful their relationship is, so I had absolutely no doubt that it would translate well on film. The trick for Joseph was how to use them, and how to incorporate the Built By Wendy dress into a fluid concept. Playing off Savides's notorious resistance to interviews, Joseph crafted an idea for "a failed interview with Harris Savides," a plan intentionally doomed from the beginning because the script said so. I say that because there is no doubt some people believe the "failed interview" is real; and some people really want it to be real. But unfortunately it's not. I will say, however, that at times reality trickled into the film.

I think that having a very natural environment with real people who already have a deep connection translates into a very truthful piece. We actually did shoot at Savides's house in Los Angeles (the location used for *Somewhere*). We shot on 16-mm film, a choice that was dictated by the script as Savides says, "I can't believe you guys are shooting this on film."

As staged as everything is, there is a moment in the final cut that happened on the day of the shoot. During one of the rehearsals, Savides asked me what stock we were using. Earlier Joseph and I had discussed colour vs. black and white. My feeling was black and

white because of our love for the look of the early *cinéma-vérité* films, such as Frederick Wiseman's *Salesman*, but I wasn't sold. I suggested that we shoot a colour stock and we could do two passes, one on colour stock and one on black and white and then decide. I dug up some old 320T Vision colour negative (7277) and off we went.

When Savides discovered what stock was in the camera, he was intrigued and proceeded to tell me how it used to be his favorite film stock and how sad he was that they didn't make it anymore. When Joseph heard this totally spontaneous interaction, he decided to incorporate it. That's how I became a voice-off character in the piece. Of course, we had to cut the stock number out of the final dialog because we ended up using the black and white take, but it still works.

I was trying to balance the light in the room and I was a little concerned about the relationship between the window light and our fill, so I tried to convince Joseph to move the couch a little closer to the window. But that compromised the blocking, so we had to keep it where it was. I was obviously concerned about the exposure and at some point Savides looks up at me from the couch and says, "how much are you reading over here," and I timidly replied "1.4 1/2" (the lens, mind you, is a T2.0). He looks at me and says, "that's plenty of light," and with that we were done. We ran through the script a few times. I proceeded to shoot the best I could impersonating a documentary cameraman and also trying to remember to say my line.

It was all over rather quickly. Sophie was wonderful and got it every time. Savides had us laughing hysterically with some of his outtakes. All in all it was one of the most pleasurable days I have spent shooting. I think it is a real testament to their relationship as father and daughter that the film turned out so nicely, and I was so thankful for their openness and for giving us such an honest performance.

Since its release I have been amazed by the response. The love and interest that people have shown is unbelievable. I would like to think that it has something to do with the film but to be honest it is all father and daughter. Their presence together on film is so charming and heart-warming that you can't help but respond well to the film. I know Joseph is getting emails from people who want to see the rest of the interview. People love and respect Savides and his work so much that there is a really genuine desire to hear from him in anyway possible. Also, I think the use of the documentary form in this piece has a lot of people convinced that it must be genuine. I had a friend send me a bunch of postings that were up on The Cinematography Mailing List (www.cinematography.net) with people arguing back and forth if it could be real or not.

In the end, it's just rewarding to have helped make something that's challenging in some way; that makes people aware of the vocabulary of the moving image. As filmmakers we must reinterpret visual language to evolve, in the future the lines between documentary and fiction will be completely re-drawn, if they haven't been already. To view "A Brief Interview with Harris Savides," visit: builtbywendy.com/films. 🍷