

OFF AND RUNNING

A Film by
Nicole Opper

76 Minutes, Color, 2009
Video, Stereo



FIRST RUN FEATURES

The Film Center Building, 630 Ninth Ave. #1213

New York, NY 10036

(212) 243-0600 Fax (212) 989-7649

Website: www.firstrunfeatures.com

Email: info@firstrunfeatures.com

<http://offandrunningthefilm.com>

SYNOPSIS:

With white Jewish lesbians for parents and two adopted brothers—one mixed-race and one Korean—Brooklyn teen Avery grew up in a unique and loving household. But when her curiosity about her African-American roots grows, she decides to contact her birth mother. This choice propels Avery into her own complicated exploration of race, identity, and family that threatens to distance her from the parents she's always known. She begins staying away from home, starts skipping school, and risks losing her shot at the college track career she had always dreamed of. But when Avery decides to pick up the pieces of her life and make sense of her identity, the results are inspiring. *OFF AND RUNNING* follows Avery to the brink of adulthood, exploring the strength of family bonds and the lengths some people must go to become themselves.

CREDITS:

Nicole Opper, Director/Producer
Sharese Bullock, Producer
Macky Alston, Executive Producer
Sandra Itkoff, Executive Producer
Jacob Okada, Director of Photography, Co-Producer
Cheree Dillon, Editor
Daniel Bernard Roumain, Composer
Richard Hankin, Creative Consultant
Judith Helfand, Consulting Producer

This film is a co-production of The Independent Television Service and a selected project of Tribeca All Access, with support from the Foundation for Jewish Culture and The National Black Programming Consortium. Fiscal sponsorship provided by Women Make Movies.

Nicole Opper, Director/Producer:

Nicole Opper most recently produced Linton Media's five-part documentary series *LSS for Here!* Networks, America's premium gay television network (aired Fall 2008). She was line producer of Macky Alston's Emmy-nominated [The Killer Within](#), (premiered Toronto Int'l Film Festival 2006, aired on Discovery Channel 2007) and associate producer of Peter Miller's [Sacco and Vanzetti](#) (premiered Full Frame 2006, First Run Features theatrical release 2007, Winner 'Best Historical Film' from the American Historical Association). Her documentary short, [Song of Hannah](#), is distributed by The National Center for Jewish Film and her short films have won multiple 'Best Short' awards and screened internationally. She has also directed and produced advocacy videos for Oxfam America, The Grameen Foundation and Positive Planet. *Off and Running*, Opper's feature-length debut, is a co-production of ITVS, in association with American Documentary/P.O.V. and The National Black Programming Consortium, with support from The Foundation for Jewish Culture and The Puffin Foundation. Opper holds a BFA in Film Production from New York University and teaches filmmaking to high school students through The School of Cinema and Performing Arts, Magic Box Productions and other media education groups.

Sharese Bullock, Producer:

Sharese Bullock is a Multimedia Producer who has served as Strategic Partnerships and Marketing Manager at ListenUp! a global youth media network. She leverages over 10 years of creative management experience in brand building, production, sponsorship marketing and community organizing to pioneer partnerships for Listen Up!'s global network. Sharese received a BA in Communications at The University of Pennsylvania and developed a broad financial skill set through the Financial Analyst program at Goldman Sachs. In 2002 she created a brand management consultancy, which services for profit and nonprofit organizations with technical writing, production, fundraising and brand management. She has led service and international education programs in over twenty countries including filmmaking exchanges for young producers throughout the UK with the Experiment in International Living (2005, 2006) and India with Adobe Youth Voices (2006). She led the outreach and distribution for "Youth Speak Out on

Education" (PBS 2004) and Beyond Borders (Independent Film Channel/Peabody Award 2006). Shares serves on the board of directors for the National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture (NAMAC) and the Advisory Board for the University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia at Temple University.

Jacob Okada, Director of Photography & Co-Producer:

Jacob's first film, Curtis, won an Honorable Mention at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival and aired on the PBS Reel New York series. Curtis also received a Warner Bros. grant and the Russell Hexter Filmmaker Grant, in recognition by his peers of Jacob's artistic merit and collaborative spirit. Jacob has recently been DP on two works in progress, Macky Alston's The Truth Will Set You Free, about Reverend V. Gene Robinson, the only openly gay bishop in the Anglican Communion, and Nina Davenport's upcoming movie about single motherhood. Other credits include work as assistant editor for Orlando Bagwell and Noland Walker on Citizen King, the two-part documentary about Martin Luther King, Jr's final years. The film was honored with a special screening at Sundance and aired nationally to much acclaim. Jacob was associate editor on New Year Baby, the groundbreaking film about a Cambodian family surviving the Khmer Rouge, which won multiple awards at international film festivals and aired on PBS's Independent Lens in 2007. He holds a BFA in Film Production from New York University.

Cheree Dillon, Editor:

Cheree Dillon started editing commercials in Chicago and with her first foray into short films she edited, Lessons for Girls, which premiered on The Education Channel and also played at Belgium's International Film Festival. Since moving to New York, she has edited social issue documentaries for a variety of non-profits including V.O.W. (Voices of Women of Color with HIV/AIDS), Passionists of Harlem, New York Women's HIV Collaborative, and The American Jewish World Service, along with teaching youth media classes around the city. She was Editor/Producer of [Song of Hannah](#), distributed by The National Center for Jewish Film and Avoda Arts. She also edited the award-winning short comedy His Name is Cosmo, which ran in festivals around the world and won three audience awards for Best Short. Her other broadcast experience includes editing for NBC's The Today Show, The Science Channel's Exploring Time, PBS's History Detectives, and other works for the Discovery Channel, HBO, HGTV, and NYC-TV.

Daniel Bernard Roumain (DBR), Composer:

Having carved a reputation for himself as an innovative composer, performer, violinist, and band leader, Haitian-American artist Daniel Bernard Roumain (DBR) melds his classical music roots with his own cultural references and vibrant musical imagination. As a composer, his works range from orchestral scores and chamber pieces to music for film, the theater, modern dance, and electronica. In 2007, DBR premiered One Loss Plus, the first of three works commissioned by the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) for their Next Wave Festival. His latest orchestral work and second BAM commission Darwin's Meditation for The People of Lincoln explores an imagined conversation between Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln. Proving that he's "about as omnivorous as a contemporary artist gets" (New York Times), DBR recently collaborated and performed with Lady Gaga on FOX's American Idol. His accolades range from being voted as "America's Assignment" on the CBS Evening News, to receiving praise as one of the "Top 100 New Yorkers" (New York Resident), "Top 40 Under 40" business people (Crain's New York Business), one of the entertainment industry's "Top 5 Tomorrow's Newsmakers" (1010 WINS Radio), and spotlighted as a "New Face of Classical Music" in Esquire Magazine. He studied music as an undergraduate at Vanderbilt University's Blair School of Music, completing his masters and doctoral work at the University of Michigan under the tutelage of Pulitzer Prize-winning composer William Bolcom. Read more: <http://www.dbrmusic.com/about.htm>

Macky Alston, Executive Producer:

Macky Alston's award-winning documentary films include Hard Road Home (premiered SXSW 2007, Independent Lens 2008) following the re-entry of several ex-offenders into free society, The Killer Within (premiered Toronto International Film Festival 2006, to air on the Discovery Channel 2007), Questioning Faith (premiered Full Frame Film Festival and Hot Docs International Film Festival, aired on HBO/Cinemax 2002), and Family Name (premiered Sundance Film Festival 1997, aired on PBS' POV 1998). He is currently directing The Truth Will Set You Free, about Reverend V. Gene Robinson, the only openly gay bishop in the Anglican Communion. His awards include the Sundance Film Festival Freedom of Expression Award and the Gotham Open Palm Award. He has appeared in press around the world

including The Oprah Winfrey Show, The Today Show, and The New York Times. Macky also serves as Director of Auburn Media, a division of the Center for Multifaith Education at Auburn Theological Seminary, which is dedicated to informed, engaging coverage of religion in the media.

Sandra Itkoff, Executive Producer:

Sandra Itkoff has been creating and producing award winning documentary films for over thirteen years and has won such distinguished awards as the duPont-Columbia University Journalism Award. She most recently produced the award-winning Defamation, which premiered at the Berlinale, won special jury prize at the 2009 Tribeca Film Festival, and is distributed by First Run Features. Presently Sandra is producing a children's animated series Grossology: the science of really gross things for Nelvana. and Heat Wave: An Unnatural Disaster, with director Judith Helfand. Sandra produced The Killer Within for Discovery Docs, and The Ten Commandments, a ten-film series that uses the Ten Commandments as a framework for a provocative look at contemporary society. She worked on Prisoner of Paradise for Alliance Atlantis and PBS, which was nominated for an Academy Award. Sandra's film Drag Kings on Tour won Best Documentary/audience awards at film festivals across North America in 2005. She executive produced the highly acclaimed four-film PBS series Cadillac Desert which garnered record ratings for PBS, and won several awards. She also executive produced The Twentieth Century Project, a six-film series in which feature film directors explored personally compelling topics that spanned the Twentieth Century -- Norman Jewison (Moonstruck, In the Heat of the Night), Barry Levinson (Diner, Rain Man), Garry Marshall (Pretty Woman), Gregory Nava (El Norte), Robert Townsend (Hollywood Shuffle), and Robert Zemeckis (Forrest Gump).

Directed and Produced by NICOLE OPPER

Produced by SHARESE BULLOCK

Written by AVERY KLEIN-CLOUD and NICOLE OPPER

Director of Photography and Co-Producer JACOB AKIRA

OKADA

Editor CHEREE DILLON

Executive Producers MACKY ALSTON and SANDRA ITKOFF

Music by DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAIN (DBR)

Creative Consultant RICHARD HANKIN

Consulting Producer JUDITH HELFAND

Associate Producer STEPHANIE STRONG

Sound Recorded by NICOLE OPPER

Additional Camera NICOLE OPPER, VEENA RAO, DAVID

SAMPLINER, and VINCENT VENTURELLA

Assistant Editor VINCENT VENTURELLA

Production Assistants BRITAIN HOPKINS, JESSICA JOHNSON, and DARREN LEE

Still Photography JACOB AKIRA OKADA and ROBERT CHANG

Online Editor and Colorist PETER HEADY

Post Production Services GOLDCREST POST PRODUCTIONS

Mix Facility SOUNDSPACE STUDIOS NYC

Sound Design and Mix MATTHEW POLIS

Production Managers for ITVS ANNELISE WUNDERLICH and CHERYL HIRASA

Programming Manager For ITVS KARIM AHMAD

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Archival Footage and Photographs Courtesy of the Klein-Cloud Family

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OFF AND RUNNING – PRESS

“CRITICS’ PICK! Fascinating and intimate.”
-[New York Magazine](#)

“A warm and tender documentary ... as the father of an adopted daughter, I was very moved. But the film is so well done that just about anybody will have that feeling.”-V.A. Musetto, [The New York Post](#)

“Like the best documentarians...Opper knows how to listen, watch, wait, and build a picture as close to her subjects' points of view as can ever be achieved by an outsider ...a tactful but probing and richly satisfying study of an entire family thrown into self-doubt by a teenager venturing into risky territory as she struggles to find her way. -Ella Taylor, [The Village Voice](#)

“A moving portrait of a very modern American family... a fascinating study that raises many important social and cultural issues.” -[This Week in New York](#)

“Lyrically made, Nicole Opper’s film addresses universal questions — “Who am I?” and “Where do I come from?” — with remarkable intelligence, sensitivity, and grace... It is an inspiring, and deeply moving portrait.” -Gary M. Kramer, [Gay City News](#)

“One of the most poignant films in this year’s festival... a unique and very American coming-of-age story that delves into the psyche of race through a fresh and careful dissection of a family's struggle.”
-Joel Høglund, [Tribeca Film Festival](#)

“What at first looks like a heartwarming portrait of a highly blended modern family turns into a no less engrossing illustration of that situation's possible pitfalls ... Stirring and accomplished.”
-Dennis Harvey, [Variety](#)

“Remarkably intimate, exceptional story.” -Kevin B. Lee, [Time Out New York](#)

“Director Nicole Opper uses her all-access pass inside this most diverse of families to explore just how important it is to know who you are before you can decide where your life is headed.”
-David Lamble, [Bay Area Reporter](#)

“Daring... Ultimately uplifting, this endearing bio-pic offers a wonderful warts-and-all look from the inside out at both the blessings and challenges of trans-cultural adoption.” -Kam Williams, [The Black Box Office](#)

“Fascinating, inspiring.” -Jennifer Merin, [About.com](#)

“Thought-provoking, entertaining and moving... intelligent and thoughtful, beautiful... never less than riveting.” -James Van Maanen, [Trustmovies](#)

“Fascinating... Opper allows Avery’s story to unfold with the sort of naturalistic drama usually associated with scripted features... a startlingly sharp portrait.” -Desson Thompson, [The Wrap](#)

“What begins as a hopeful voyage of self-discovery turns into something more fraught. The documentary itself is transformed as it follows Avery on her journey, growing ever more suspenseful and emotionally resonant.” — Pam Grady, [Frameline](#)

“Off and Running” inspires ... suspenseful and deeply felt.”-Richard Propes, [The Independent Critic](#)

“Fascinating.” -Joseph Von Lanthier, [Slant Magazine](#)

“This coming of age documentary is captivating.” -[The Advocate](#)



Gay City NEWS



Avery Kline-Cloud (pictured), the young adoptive daughter of two lesbian mothers who is the subject of Nicole Opper's "Off and Running." (FIRST RUN FEATURES)

The Third Mom

Published: Thursday, January 21, 2010 5:29 PM CST

Director, subject chronicle a lesbian family adoptee's search for her roots

BY GARY M. KRAMER

"Off and Running" is lesbian filmmaker Nicole Opper's remarkable documentary about Avery Kline-Cloud, the adopted African-American teenage daughter of two mothers who also have two adopted sons, one Hispanic, the other Asian. As she starts to think about college, Avery ponders whether to try to contact her birth mother. It's a decision that sets a painful chain of events in motion.

Lyrical made, Nicole Opper's film addresses universal questions — "Who am I?" and "Where do I come from?" — with remarkable intelligence, sensitivity, and grace. Avery is an incredibly self-possessed teen, and her heartfelt story becomes painful to watch as her decisions and actions have significant consequences.

Opper spoke on the phone from her home in New York about "Off and Running" and its subject, Avery, whom she has known for ten years. Opper met Avery when the filmmaker was a student at NYU and interested in interviewing students at the Jewish school Avery attended.

"She was nine, and had her hand up first to volunteer," Opper recalled. "I proposed a film class at the school, and Avery was a student in that class."

Their collaboration on "Off and Running" began a few years later.

"When Avery turned 16, I could tell there was something profound happening with her — that she was going through serious changes and having a rough time," Opper said. "I became curious about what was going on, and that curiosity stemmed from my investment in her family with two lesbian moms. I am a young lesbian who wants to adopt and have a family myself. I started asking Avery questions and it organically blossomed into this film."

"Off and Running" chronicles Avery questioning what it means to be black — having grown up in a white, Jewish world where she never felt she fit in. Avery's epiphany comes when she realizes that you are in control of who you become, a powerful message that will resonate with anyone who sees this wonderful film.

Opper originally had what she called "an optimistic, maybe naïve vision" of how Avery's coming-of-age tale would unfold. She explained how that vision changed.

“I saw this strong, interracial family with lesbian moms, but it was a discovery for me to see how deep these issues of race were going to influence the story,” the filmmaker explained. “Religious identity plays a role, but it was never a conflict for Avery. Nor were her parent’s sexual identity. Race was key, it trumped all, and I wasn’t prepared for that.”

The filmmaker believes Avery’s story has broad appeal because it shows a search for identity and individuality that is commonplace among teenagers and adults of any race, class, or sexual orientation. As Avery becomes troubled by issues surrounding her birth mother, she begins to break away from her lesbian mothers, skip school, and fail in track — her area of achievement.

One of the film’s most powerful sequences has Avery missing her moms’ marriage ceremony in Canada.

“That wedding scene broke my heart,” Opper admitted. “We thought Avery would go. I considered not going myself. Her family is so much a part of her story. She is so defined by them. I felt having a scene in which Avery was absent was going to feel her absence, this imbalance. That became a question of where is she present if she’s not physically present in the scene.”

Halfway through filming, Avery disappeared for a several months. When she resurfaced, Opper let her into the edit room and explained that she could not tell Avery’s story without her. The filmmaker gave Avery the task of writing her own narration and asked that she offer feedback as the film was made.

“We worked hard to decipher what was going on in her head, and give it context and understanding,” Opper said. “Avery was in charge of all of that. She would write, and we were editing together.”

The collaborative nature of the project is what makes it so personal and gripping.

The filmmaker sees “Off and Running” as something that could be shown in schools as a “support tool” for teenagers.

“Avery was grappling with issues universal to teens in America today, and also issues very specific to her experience as a trans-racial adoptee,” Opper said. “We showed rough cuts to teenagers and, by and large, people were identifying with Avery — kids who on the surface had nothing in common with her except age.”

Opper said her own journey to her identity as a lesbian was a connection point with Avery.

“I have always had a desire to tell stories before I was aware of my own sexuality,” she said. “Being on the periphery creates a commitment to connecting with other people who share in that experience and to give voice to their stories.”

While reticent in generalizing about same-sex parents, the filmmaker said, “The interesting thing about queer parents and families is that there is often a greater openness to embracing people outside of your own experience.”

Opper said she learned many things about herself working with Avery over the three years it took to complete the film.

“I discovered my patience,” she said. “And I learned how important it is to resist making assumptions about what people are feeling or going through at that age. We think because we had this experience, we know this experience. I don’t think anyone can understand how complicated this was for Avery or how abandoned she felt. This was a tightly knit family and she still felt abandoned, and I think she had every right to. She was longing for this connection [with her birth mother]. So many of us take this for granted. I tried to honor that.”

“Off and Running” poignantly and perceptively chronicles Avery’s quest and her family’s resiliency. It is an inspiring, and deeply moving portrait.

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THE JERUSALEM POST

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All in the family

A new documentary by Nicole Opper sheds light on an unconventional Jewish family that pushes the boundaries of race and gender

• By NATHAN BURSTEIN



If you walk in late during a screening of *Off and Running*, Nicole Opper's new documentary, you might be startled when the Asian-American therapist tells the black teenager, "You know what it means ... to be white and Jewish more than you do anything else." But as the rest of the audience is already aware, the therapist isn't looking at the wrong case file, or confusing the teenager, Avery, with another patient. Although Avery doesn't fit the profile of a typical Jewish New Yorker, that is indeed her identity—or one of them, in any case.

Untangling Avery's complicated feelings about her background serves as a focal point of *Off and Running*, a quiet but engaging look at interracial adoption that opens Friday at the IFC Center in the West Village.

As Avery reports in the film's opening scenes, her own nuclear unit refers to itself jokingly as "the United Nations" – comprised, as it is, of white Jewish parents, a black older brother, and a younger sibling with roots in Korea. Did we mention that both of the parents are women?

Even the most conventional family can send some teenagers into fits of soul-searching and rebellion, so it isn't surprising that Avery, as it turns out, also has some issues. Born Mycole Antwonisha and given up by an unseen mother in Texas, the young Avery was adopted and renamed as an infant by Travis, a Midwestern transplant to New York.

For most of her young life, Avery has had a second mother in Tova, an Israeli-born woman she first meets at a group for children and single parents. (Tova, at the time, had already adopted Rafi, who would later become Avery's older brother.) Named a Top 10 Audience Favorite at last April's Tribeca Film Festival, *Off and Running* has continued collecting awards at other movie showcases around the country, including the prestigious SilverDocs Film Festival near Washington, DC. Praised by audiences and juries alike at several gay and lesbian film festivals, the documentary was screened recently at Jewish film festivals in Boston and Atlanta, and will be shown at additional Jewish festivals in San Diego and Denver next month.

A GIFTED runner with plenty of friends, Avery can be unusually articulate when she feels like it – but also, as the film shows, can be withdrawn and uncommunicative. A graduate of the Hannah Senesh Community Day School in Brooklyn – where Opper met her while filming a documentary about the school's namesake, a heroine of the Holocaust – she appears at ease during a reunion with her mostly white former classmates, as well as at a separate event with black classmates from her high school.

Avery's fluid transition between the two worlds isn't as easy as it seems, however – at least after she initiates a correspondence with her biological mother. Despite the obvious open-mindedness and support of her adoptive family – "You take after me," Tova tells her at one point, without irony – the silence that follows Avery's letter to her birth mom triggers a period of distancing and estrangement. However much Tova and Travis understand her behavior – at least some of it – on an intellectual level, her retreat upsets and angers them, even as they celebrate their own marriage in Canada.

Rafi, meanwhile, offers a contrast in his own thoughtful way, reacting to similar questions about his birth mother with an entirely different approach. If the film sounds like a swirling mix of people and stories, it is – as well as an untidy convergence of competing ideas. Without belaboring the point, the film shows that none of the characters is quite what you might expect, and the surprises, though small, are big enough to alert viewers to assumptions they might not have been aware they were making.

Produced partly with funding from the Foundation for Jewish Culture, *Off and Running* will move to additional cities and film festivals in the coming months, and will air later this year on *POV*, the documentary series on PBS.

"The people I hear from are really thrilled to see a depiction of a Jewish family that is non-traditional, interracial and lesbian-headed," says the 29-year-old Opper, for whom *Off and Running* is her first feature-length project.

"There just isn't a lot of representation of these families out there" – but they are out there, as rich and complicated as anyone else. 6

Hammer to Nail

Ambitious Film

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[A Conversation With Nicole Opper](#)

Posted by [Pamela Cohn](#)

[01 / 27 / 10](#)

In post-screening Q&As, most documentary filmmakers always say that the success of a nonfiction project really centers on the collaboration between storyteller and subject. But during the making of the film, how many of them actually say to their subject, “You choose. Do you want this scene in the film, or not?” That would be a typical exchange between filmmaker Nicole Opper and her teenaged subject, Avery Klein-Cloud, during an edit session of their film *Off and Running*. While Avery does not share a directing credit, she does share a writing one: the two garnered a Writers Guild of America Documentary Screenplay Award at SILVERDOCS last June.

The relationship between 29-year-old Opper and 20-year-old Klein-Cloud could be said to be a love story, for in working together on this film (shot over the course of three years), each realized new personal and professional heights with the support of a strong partner and a shared vision. They met in a Jewish day school in Brooklyn a decade ago; Opper the new, shy teacher right out of university, and Avery, the rambunctious and joyful student, a beautiful dark-skinned black girl. This is also when Opper got an eyeful of Avery’s unusual family. With several professional credits under her belt as a filmmaker, she went back to them many years later and asked if they’d be the subjects of her first feature-length documentary.

Off and Running tells the story of the Klein-Cloud family, a white lesbian couple who are raising three children in a loving Jewish household. Before meeting, each woman had adopted a child—Tova adopting Rafi, a mixed-race boy, Travis adopting Avery, an African-American girl; after many years together, they also adopted Zay-Zay, a Korean boy. As Avery nears the end of her high school career and is getting ready for college, she starts to have an urgent need to contact her birth mother, curious about the roots she’s never explored. This catalyzes an intense identity crisis in the young woman and we share her rocky journey as she searches for her true north, as she attempts to gather together all the disparate elements of her identity—African American, Jew, transracial adoptee, athlete, sister, daughter. Click [here](#) to see the trailer.

On January 29th, *Off and Running* will have its theatrical premiere at the [IFC Center](#). In addition to the above-mentioned prize, the film won jury nods for Outstanding Doc at [Outfest](#) and Philadelphia’s [Q Fest](#). The film premiered at the 2009 Tribeca Film Festival (where it was a top-ten audience fave) and will have its national broadcast debut on PBS’ P.O.V. 2010 series, airing this November. Many of independent film’s most prestigious and important organizations have been behind it from the start—Tribeca All Access, ITVS, P.O.V., the IFP, DocuClub and New York Women in Film and Television, among others. Opper was also named one of *Filmmaker Magazine*’s [25 New Faces of Independent Film](#) this year.

During this talk on a cold New Year’s Eve late afternoon over bowls of soup and crackers, we two old ladies sat and gabbed about storytelling. Nicole acknowledged that, “The ghost in the room is Avery and it’s a bit painful to even sit for an interview and talk about this film without her weighing in. She is the filmmaker, too.”

Hammer To Nail: How long have you been a filmmaker?

NO: Since 1997. I was making “backyard” videos with friends.

H2N: Did anything momentous happen to you when you picked up a camera?

NO: No, not really. At that point, it was just an extension of theater for me. I grew up doing community theater as a performer and then, as soon as possible, as a director. I directed things like comedy sketches, monologues, this and that. Originally, I was just really passionate about theater and performance; the camera was just an easy way to keep that going and to control a bit more through editing.

H2N: What excited you the most about directing?

NO: The collaboration—I love collaboration, the collaborative spirit, working with someone and trying to meld two visions, or three or four. I always questioned my abilities and authenticity in terms of being the right person to tell a story and I did during the making of this film—for a very long time I felt that way. I was actually quite open about it with Avery and it was a constant conversation between us. I would ask, “Avery, how do you feel about the fact that I’m directing this movie about you?” *[laughs]* And her answer would always change, which was fun. By the end though, she was saying that I was really the right person to tell it because she thought, in a weird way, I could understand what it’s like to be her. I thought that was interesting because I felt that I could never know what it’s like to be her. How could I be the right person? For her, it was the gay thing, as if by being gay I would know what her life was like growing up in a gay world with her moms.



H2N: It really doesn't seem to me that she grew up in a "gay world," necessarily. Is that how she saw it?

NO: Well, I think if you're a child of gay people, there is a community there, automatically.

H2N: Due to the private nature of Tova and Travis, we don't really see a lot of that, though.

NO: No, not in the film.

H2N: The Jewish aspects are, obviously, very much in place, since she was put into a Jewish day school as a kid. What was it about the gay experience, being raised by two moms, that was so profound, do you think?

NO: What fascinates me about the fact that she says this now, is that she was combative about it for so long. While the camera was rolling during interviews, I was always trying to pull that out of her, this idea that her moms could relate to her as an outsider in this way. She was the one to really educate me. She'd say, "Open your eyes, Nicole. No! Just because my moms are gay doesn't mean they understand my experience, as an outsider, as a black woman growing up in a Jewish community." By the time I really came around to understanding that, she turned it back on me by telling me that she thought I was the right person to tell her story because of my own gay experience. It's a bit contradictory. That's part of the fun of telling a coming-of-age story. Your subject is forever changing while you're making the film. I got to track

that. While we were preserving certain moments, everything was evolving. It's really acute when you're a teenager, even though we evolve throughout our lives.

H2N: In your next project, your main subjects are also teens, also outsiders, so you're obviously strongly drawn to these stories of a young person's evolution. What is it in particular that attracts you to those stories?

NO: I love watching people discover themselves and figure themselves out. It's a gift when you get to see it firsthand. It's not something that's obvious; we don't notice ourselves, necessarily, when we're having revelations. They just happen organically. When you're filming it, you get to revisit it in the edit room and actually track a person's evolution. I just want to keep doing that over and over again.

H2N: What moments in the film are hard for Avery?

NO: They're not the moments that I would assume would be hard for her. But that could also change over time and those moments that don't seem to faze her now, might one day. But she was very mature in her thinking about a lot of the obstacles she encountered. She had a broad perspective about a lot of what she was experiencing. I was really impressed by that, always.

H2N: You never actually lived with the Klein-Clouds, correct?

NO: No, although it did come up at one point since they had a spare room but that was too much. What actually happened was that I was moving to Brooklyn with my girlfriend at the time and we were looking at a bunch of places to live and Tova got really involved and started looking on Craigslist for places around the neighborhood. I told her I wasn't sure I should be right next door. *[laughs]* Living in the same house with them would have been weird. Although, I'm doing that for the next one; however, it's not just one family.

H2N: Because you were friends with them, were boundaries an issue? Did that crop up from time to time? This is a constant issue to ponder in documentary, especially ones that happen over the course of several years.

NO: I don't know; it's hard to say. But yes is the answer, actually. Ethics are tricky. There is no defined document as there is in, say, journalism. We had a contract between us of sorts that went beyond a release form. When I approached them, I had a three-page document written up about what I was interested in, the specific issues that I wanted to explore in the film. I wanted to be sure they were clear about my intentions. Because one thing I doubted from the beginning was the fact that they were really hearing me when I said that this was going to be a feature documentary film and I wanted it to be on public television. So that was something we revisited over and over again. I appreciated how open they were being and how much access they were permitting. And yet, if they didn't think it was going anywhere, then that made everything pretty much a moot point, right? It was important that they understood that I wanted this to go far.

H2N: But how does that change things in terms of their participation? Or does it?

NO: I know that there were certain things they wanted to remain private and never really shared. But, for the most part, because they saw how close I was to their daughter and because they believed that I was a good influence on her life, they were open to sharing whatever they could share. To some degree, it was a matter of desperation. There would be moments when they didn't know where Avery was and I did. So we all had to be open and honest and trusting of one another.

H2N: And how did that affect the trust between you and Avery?

NO: I would tell her that I was going to call them to tell them where she was. It was just a matter of her not wanting to pick up the phone and deal. It wasn't as though she wanted them to be sitting up at night sick with worry about her. She just didn't want to be the one making the move. So that never really became a conflict for any of us, I don't think. But, there were things that were conflicting. There were moments when Tova would call and tell me all about something Avery had done and I would eventually have to say that it was too much for me. I'm choosing to tell this story from Avery's point-of-view. What she says contradicts what you're telling me. I had to ask her to not call me with all the details. She was really wonderful about it.

. . . Actually, I think I got that wrong. She initiated all that and told me that she felt it was stressing me out when she would call and tell me things, so she decided to lay off. And I said thank you. There were moments when both of us knew that Avery was straight-up lying, but I had to stay committed to her, to the integrity of that idea that it was her story and we're telling it from her point-of-view.



H2N: Did you ever worry that this whole process of documenting her story was, somehow, detrimental to her in any way?

NO: I worried about that a lot. I never felt that it was, but I was constantly policing myself about it, just to be sure. Going back to this question of ethics: so many of us end up relying on our gut instinct and hoping that we're right, hoping that we have this moral center that's guiding us. So, if I felt uncomfortable or uneasy or guilty about something, then I would stop and check myself. The question implicit there is, are we right when we're following our gut? Does our gut really know what's best? That's where I was always stuck: I think I'm doing the right thing, but if there is no standard out there, how can we ever know? This is something that can still be discovered since I'll be in touch with Avery for a long time. If she decides in ten or twenty years that I screwed her up, then we'll talk about it then. *[laughs]* But that doesn't seem to be the case right now.

H2N: The camera, oftentimes, is used a lot as a “confessional” tool with kids, without making it all that inclusive for an audience except in a very passive, voyeuristic way. Does that irk you, is that bothersome?

NO: The only thing that really bothers me, and should be thought about a lot more than it is, are subjects not being in on the agenda, subjects not being fully aware of what a filmmaker is after, what message they're trying to send. When there isn't transparency, and the filmmaker isn't talking about his or her goals in the story he or she sees taking shape, and including the subject in the feedback sessions and editorial decisions, then I think real damage can be done, or there's the potential for it. I worry about that a lot. Reality television has set many lows in exploitation.

H2N: It's exposing someone in a way that has nothing to do with telling his or her story, that's for sure. It's all about the gotcha moment, more or less.

NO: That's really what it comes down to: if, as a filmmaker, you can't have just basic respect for the people being represented in your film, that's a real problem.

H2N: Yet some filmmakers would argue that that also serves a purpose, that it's part and parcel of documentary filmmaking, this idea of exposure, of uncovering something.

NO: Well, maybe I need to have a harder edge, but that kind of stuff offends me on a really personal level. That always needs to be recognized, this notion that the people in your film are not pawns and the film that you make is going to live with them and represent them for the rest of their lives. I know it's been going on forever and ever and will continue, but if you can't look the person in the eye that sat there and trusted you with their story, then how do you live with yourself?

H2N: Have you and Avery talked about revisiting her years from now, coming back into her life as a "where are they now" kind of thing? Why are you making gagging noises? [laughter]

NO: You know, we can't all be Michael Apter. It's too much, you know?! [laughs] We filmed a specific time in a specific place. I will always be fascinated by Avery, but I'd like the continuation of our relationship to be off-camera.

H2N: But capturing a larger trajectory of a life—is that interesting to you at all?

NO: Absolutely. I guess I would say if we can step outside the confines of a feature documentary, time length and all of these things, then there are a lot more possibilities. I just saw this update on [Outside, Looking In: Transracial Adoption in America](#), in which the filmmaker himself is a subject, a transracial adoptee. He did this piece that was commissioned as a new media piece where he goes back and interviews his nephew again who's now much older, very well spoken. He re-interviews himself, too, about where they stand now, several years later. It's about a 15-minute piece that streams online. I can see something like that happening. But it would need to take a different form.

H2N: There are infinite possibilities for that now and that will continue to burgeon, I think. The way we share media is so different than it was even two or three years ago. The cycle, too, of creating and making a feature-length doc is burdensome—fundraising, grant-writing, rough cut after rough cut in review with any number of people. It's a long endeavor in terms of time and stamina. Is there some other way in which you think about making films?

NO: I'm as excited as the next person about all the possibilities of social media, new media. But, I do really romanticize the traditional feature-length film, in particular, the communal experience of sitting in a theater. I think there's something really special in that. I start to feel a little empty or alienated whenever people start talking about watching everything on their laptops. Maybe I'll change with the times, but I love the theatrical experience and I hope it never goes away. The way I like to think of it is as complementary work to a long-form piece, extensions of it, if you will, rather than a replacement.

H2N: What draws you to another human being, in general, to make you spend that much time documenting his or her story and investing time beyond the project itself, beyond the exploration of all the external issues brought out in that process? In other words, where is the delineation between what that process feeds you as an artist and what it feeds you, personally? Coming off this experience, a particularly successful personal and professional partnership, what kinds of expectations do you have going forward?

NO: It certainly set a standard for me. I don't feel like I could now make a film where the people in the film didn't play a really important creative role—maybe not everybody in the film, but in this case, Avery, the main subject. I don't know if I've been able to identify it; it's really elusive. It's kind of like magic, what these qualities are that add up to a person that you want to completely obsess yourself over [laughs]. Probably, first and foremost, is her willingness to be so completely honest and raw and vulnerable. It's such

a gift and an honor when someone opens herself up to you that way and if what's revealed is really interesting and relevant and worthy of a story, then I'm going to want to follow it through and give up everything to do it.



H2N: She's so intent on transcending her circumstance. It's an exceedingly difficult thing to do. We still live in a society that's quite intent on boxing people in more than anything else. In Avery's particular circumstance, though, there's really no way to box that girl in or define her in terms of her life, her family, etc. It's something she seemed to have innately realized from when she was little. And on the other hand, at least the way this story is told, there seems to be an astounding amount of naïveté on the part of Tova and Travis about just that, that this circumscribed world of Jewish day school and birthright issues and the color of her skin wouldn't, somehow, kind of blow up into a real crisis of identity.

NO: I would always ask certain leading questions about that, but you know I've kind of moved on this issue a bit, too. Number one, I really respect them as parents and I really do believe they tried their best. And maybe their best wasn't good enough but we could say that about all sorts of things. It's a tough one. Sometimes I get angry on this issue because I'm protective of them, too. We get to pass all sorts of judgments on adoptive parents, particularly queer adoptive parents are under real scrutiny about how they're raising "our" children—society's collective children. You would never get away with that with a biological parent. Those parents get to say, "Don't tell me how to raise my child. I know what's best for my child." So there is this part of me that feels like saying, "Screw you, don't tell them [*Tova and Travis*] how to raise their child!" They're her parents; they're the ones who have known her since birth the way nobody else has. They're paying attention to all her needs, her personality, her special quirks that only they really know. At the same time, I totally recognize everything that the film is highlighting about racial difference and privilege. I'm a little bit reticent to comment further than what the film already says on that issue out of respect for them.

H2N: I certainly wouldn't be one to demonize them for their shortcomings, if indeed that's what they are. But I think their closeness to this child has created a bit of myopia and I don't know too many instances where that isn't true in any parent/child relationship. But from what you've told me about different experiences in Q&As, this is a real hard-core issue for a lot of people who are not shy at all about passing judgment on these two women raising three adoptive children of varying races and ethnicities.

NO: In a most gentle and respectful way, I ask people to just look at themselves and their own way of doing things rather than putting energy into deciding what's wrong with the way Tova and Travis are raising their kids. All of us can always improve.

H2N: How have teens responded to the film?

NO: It's a mix. I haven't talked to a lot of boys about this film, but so far, for the most part, I sense that young women Avery's age really glom onto it. They really relate. Young men are a little bit more, um, let's

say lukewarm, towards it [*laughs*]. Obviously, I hate gender generalizations; I know there are and will be some young men that can relate to her story in several ways. I've showed a lot of other young media makers the film—16-, 17-, 18-year-old kids that are picking up video cameras and making their own stories and they all appreciate it because they recognize Avery's role in it. They see that she chose to leave things in the film that were probably hard for her. They see themselves in her and in the various situations in which she finds herself. There may be nothing in common on the surface in terms of their own personal experience, but they get Avery.



H2N: Did you have that particular audience distinctly in mind while making this?

NO: Yeah. I mean I certainly always hoped that it would resonate for teenagers, never really knowing if it would. I think the reality for most documentaries today is that if it's going to be seen by that age group, it'll be in schools and other educational settings, so that's my goal, really, to get it there, beyond public television where the audience is much older. When I went to ITVS for orientation, they told us that the largest PBS audiences are those under six and those over sixty!

H2N: Well, that cuts a wide swath. [*laughter*]

NO: Stats change a little bit for POV and some other strands.

H2N: I think the other issue, of course, is content since there's so little media that's really substantive for that age group. It's remarkable that more people are not tapping into this amazing resource of young people really hungry to see themselves portrayed in genuine ways. The best stuff I've seen is, in fact, made by themselves for themselves, you know? It seems you get that innately in the work you mean to do; it's a very specific goal for you and that you consider this a vital and valuable way to storytell, in a sea of content that is not really all that vital or valuable. In this portrait of a young woman, you've captured such a mélange of elements that make up a life—both the great and not-so-great. They interchange constantly so that it becomes a very human story, i.e., messy and complicated. You're right in your estimation of Avery's bravery to share all that.

When you're teaching filmmaking to young people, what kinds of ways do you impress upon them that that kind of depth is really important?

NO: I'm not sure I do. I try to draw it out in subtle ways, of course. There's definitely no formula. Generally, I just call their bluff. If I see a lot of posing going on, I'll say, "Tell me what's really going on?" I think that has to happen in the moment or it'll never happen at all.

H2N: The camera can also record something that we then re-watch and don't recognize. Do you think young people get that something unexpected can be translated from "real life" to one that's portrayed on video?

NO: Young people are incredibly savvy and they recognize that anything going into the camera will be manipulated in the edit. That's why I advocate for them learning how to control their own stories. I think the concern is when they open up to an adult who doesn't necessarily have their best interests in mind. They go off and make the film they want to make. The kids aren't really a part of all that. That's where I get really protective. There's a mix of good and bad when someone is in charge in the edit room and trying to tell their own story. There are so many reasons, as we know, why autobiographical filmmakers choose to hire an editor in order to be able to look at their own work in a somewhat objective way. In the case of teenagers, it's such an opportunity to reflect and learn about where they are in life and, as Avery puts it, what she may want "to change about herself." I think it's always preferable that they give it a shot, being in charge of how they manipulate their own story.

H2N: Do you think that might inform them on how to turn a camera on other people and do them justice? To me, that's an essential exercise to go through for any media maker—first see how it feels to be the subject. Have you turned the camera on yourself?

NO: Never. A bit ironic, I know. However, just a couple of days ago, I did just that with a Flipcam. I made a little video diary, which I did not edit. I did it in the subway. And then I went home and I watched it. It was interesting. [*laughs*] I'm looking at myself as a character, a whole other entity. I've been on the other side of someone's camera on occasion but certainly didn't have any creative control. [*Interestingly, since this interview took place, Nicole tells me that she's been filming herself practically every single day.*]

So far, in my experience in working with teenagers who are making their own work, they tend to be really, really honest and tend to try not to "dress up" their own image, at least not as much as adults do. There's less of an agenda, maybe less at stake. I do notice that adults that are making autobiographical work will often create unrecognizable characters because of the message they're trying to send, whatever agenda they're serving takes precedence over authenticity. Teenagers, for the most part, are just trying to figure themselves out through the use of this medium. You can feel the difference.

H2N: What are some of the more profound aspects of that, particularly when they're in the edit? What do you notice about the choices they make that might be different from the way you might edit that same piece?

NO: Obviously, teenagers are the most self-conscious people in the world. There's always the "bad angle" issue or a place where they think they sound stupid. It's really tough to generalize with these things. I guess I could say that this honesty and purity has become this diamond-in-the-rough way of working for kids that have become bombarded with so many un-truths in the media. You always recognize when they've delivered something that's truthful. They attach themselves to that right away. They can recognize that when something moves them, it's going to probably move other people, as well.

H2N: Circling back to this whole theatrical experience, we can say that there's a lot of passivity in taking in media, a one-way exchange, if you will. But in a cinema, there can be a profound exchange with the audience, a profound connection can be made. It's cheesy when you talk about it, for some reason, but that's really what we're all looking for, this transcendence that enables us to connect, especially to a story that might be really far away from our own reality.

NO: You're helping me tap into something that I think happened with Avery a lot during interviews. There were so many adults trying to tell her what she should do and what they thought would be best for her. It got so overwhelming and jumbled in her mind, that interviews became this moment of, almost, a cry for help. "Here's how I feel. Here's what I think. At least you're listening and your camera's recording. Let's just put it out there."

H2N: The portrayal of the relationship with her and Rafi, this brother and sister act was, for me, one of the strongest aspects. Because you have this boy/man who can intellectualize, in a pretty facile way, what Avery is expressing in pure emotion. She's experiencing a lot of trauma in the years you spent documenting her story. He's so hyper-articulate, has a real gift for language. This, ironically, is how he probably dissembles a bit and keeps the chaos of being a teenager at bay. He's the perfect foil for her, a sounding board that is distinctive from everything else around her—and also, he was raised the same way she was, he was adopted, too, he's a mixed-race kid raised by two white women, etc. But he's also male, he's light-skinned, he has astoundingly ambitious academic abilities and goals for himself and he feels confident in those abilities. He also brings a real light-heartedness to things and can bring Avery back down a bit from the precipice when she's about to really crack.

NO: It was both intentional and a happy accident that these two voices together create this unique perspective on things. He has such a way of controlling the conversation sometimes, both with his intellect, and then with his silliness. I certainly felt like it was important that people see how differently Avery and Rafi developed, the different ways they processed the same things and move through the world based on those processes of discovery about who they are and their place in the world. They were raised by the same two people. It's important, for nothing else, to avoid these generalizations about what must happen when you put people in situations together. It was definitely a bit of a happy accident that he became such a foil for her in that way.

H2N: Does the finished film disappoint you in any way? I mean, specifically, in terms of its reception by an audience.

NO: More than anything else, I can't help but feel disappointed when people just boil it down to a simple black-and-white issue of Avery's way of making the right, or wrong, choices. I see it as this very complicated interplay of race and sexuality, difference and identity, adoption issues, the erasing of her birth history. I find it so frustrating when people ignore the weight and importance of that. It is a vital issue for so many adoptees, this negation of history. They have no contact with the birth family or very little information, which is still the case of so many. These are the only citizens that cannot access their own birth certificates. I get that there would be this knee-jerk response from a lot of adoptive parents, that they [*Tova and Travis*] are not quite doing it right. It's so much bigger than that, though. When that happens, I feel like I've failed. But I also feel like it's a bit out of my control. I do not feel like I failed in my portrayal of Avery because she's very happy with the film. She stands up for it, shows up to every Q&A she's invited to and has been enjoying the process of seeing it go out into the world. The moms have a harder time with it. They're very private people. But they've also expressed their approval of the film.

H2N: You're embarking on your next project where your subjects are from a different culture [*Mexico*], but are also teenagers finding their way in a particular situation. Knowing that this collaboration will be informed by the one you had with Avery, what are your particular concerns? Or is it just too early to say?

NO: It might be too early to say. I haven't had a lot of fantasies about how it will go because it's all sort of a vague blur right now. But it helps to know that I'm not walking into alien territory. I've been to this place before and I've been moved and changed and transformed by this place before. I know, more or less, what I'm walking into. Of course, there will be cultural differences, but at the same time, I was raised and grew up with this culture because I grew up ten minutes away from Mexico [*in San Diego, California*]. It's not going to be like landing in a place in Africa for the first time. I feel connected to this culture even though it's not mine. I want to allow myself to be surprised and not suppose or bet on anything that might, or might

not, happen. When I step off the plane, we'll see what happens. This method can be problematic when it comes to proposal writing, of course.

H2N: Yeah, but that kind of stuff you can make up knowing it's going to change profoundly anyway—we're talking about documentary here, after all. [laughter]

NO: I think you just absolutely have to believe that your project is not about you. It's about the story and if everything you're doing is serving the story and you feel strongly that that story can do some kind of good in the world, then the confidence will follow. That's how it was with *Off and Running*. It was never about, "Oh, believe in me as a filmmaker [to potential funders, grant-giving entities, etc.]." It was more like believe in the worth and power of this story and how much Avery has to share with us. And I hope you'll think I'll be good enough to do the job. That's really what it was about. It's the same for the next one. I firmly believe that people need to know that this foster home for abandoned kids exists, this amazing, self-sustaining weird little social experiment of a home that has survived and thrived for three decades already and will continue to do so. But it's kind of a loner out there and I wonder why it's never been replicated and why more of them don't exist. The foster care system there is in shambles. We can learn from it. I'm going to have to depend on the compelling personalities of these boys to get that story across. I'm expecting support for this project because of them, not because they might find me particularly compelling, but because I can do the job.

H2N: Whose work do you admire?

NO: Sam Pollard, definitely, first and foremost. *Four Little Girls*, the film he edited and produced, is probably the most impactful film I've seen; seeing that film made me want to do this. Macky [*Alston*], for sure—his films are great but, more than that, he's a person I really admire, which I can say for all my mentors. Judith Helfand's work has been a big inspiration for me, in particular, especially *Healthy Baby Girl*, which is very personal and raw, difficult to watch even. That's the kind of stuff I love.

H2N: Would you ever turn the camera on yourself, do you think, be the protagonist of your own film?

NO: I'm not opposed to it. If it seems like the right thing to do, if the story calls for it. So far, it hasn't. The performer part of me has really receded into the background.

This next project is just something I'm really anxious to begin even though *Off and Running* has a pretty intense course still to run—the theatrical release, more festivals, the broadcast in November. But I hope to devote a year of shooting for this next one after my three-month research trip. When I come back, I hope to have a much clearer answer for that. I've told them that for one year I need to live there and shoot every day. I want that structure, that defined time frame for both myself and for them. But I do want very much to develop a similar collaboration and that really will dictate the time frame more than anything. They're opening themselves up and making the choice to participate and that's what I have to honor above everything. It levels the playing field a little bit, makes things more fair.

H2N: We'd see different pieces of filmmaking, I think, if more filmmakers collaborated the way you mean to with your subjects. It is unique.

NO: Well, you end up being really surprised. I don't know—maybe I had a miraculously unique experience with Avery and the rest of the family. I told Tova and Travis to please tell me about any changes they wanted to make. The most obvious stuff where they're struggling and vulnerable and they're lost a bit—they never asked to change any of that stuff or to not keep it in the final cut. It was usually just factual things that they wanted to set straight or the more subtle understandings about their relationship to Avery. It was never about censoring us. I just think people would be really surprised at how willing subjects are to be brave and let themselves be seen as flawed human beings for the sake of the film or the project. That's what they did. They didn't say, "Make me look better." They said, "Get it right. Be accurate." We also have to

take into account that they were heroes of mine when I met them. They were the first gay parents I'd ever met and they were people with whom I wanted to maintain a relationship. I would hope that, regardless of how much I wanted that, though, I would still be respectful of their wishes. But in this case, in particular, they were real role models for me, guides in a way. They're twice my age. There's just innate respect.

H2N: Your generosity of spirit in truly understanding what that kind of collaboration involves, is somewhat rare, even in an art form that prides itself on that. But really what most filmmakers want is access and cooperation, a good performance, certainly. But this kind of collaboration where your subject's in the edit room? Not so sure that occurs that often. The bottom line is that, Tova and Travis aside, Avery's story, in the wrong hands, could have been disastrous. She traverses some very dicey territory and the way in which all that is documented could have potentially been very damaging—to all concerned.

NO: Definitely. But we documentary filmmakers open ourselves up to that vulnerability, too. More than any other art form, this one forces you to ask hard questions every step of the way. We feel compelled (or are asked) to show a work-in-progress—something not even finished—to expose our work to a lot of people we don't even know. There are a lot of artists that reject that kind of thing. But it's part of how we work. I had endless rough cut screenings with people I didn't know, who didn't know me. I felt like I gained a lot from that. Sometimes I thought it was a waste of my time. But usually it was really useful. I'm not going to generalize, but that seems a lot less common in other art forms. The narrative filmmakers I know would absolutely refuse to show anything they didn't want to show and leave it open to criticism. It's between them and their editor and people see it when it's done.

H2N: There are plenty of documentarians that are like that, as well.

NO: I can make the generalization that it happens less with documentary because documentarians feel this responsibility, this obligation to representing this whole "social experience" to people. I don't agree with that, necessarily. It depends on the film. Who's that guy that made the Vogue movie? RJ Cutler, right?

H2N: *The September Issue*.

NO: Yes. I can sense he's kind of a large ego, as well, but he's always telling people that it's wrong to expect that documentary filmmakers are solely out to get some kind of large sociological survey of something or other. I appreciate that because he says out loud what a lot of us are thinking but afraid to say. Sometimes it just takes someone very forthright and opinionated to say it out loud. You're grateful somebody said it. Because it's obnoxious. We're all telling stories. I don't always want to be justifying my work based on its social value and he was saying that in the guise of his own film—it's not an exposé or major commentary on the fashion industry, it's a portrait of a woman. He said that it's a misconception (and I'm paraphrasing here) that audiences have, that we are only about telling these "collective experiences." It's just storytelling, like anything else.

— Pamela Cohn

http://www.tribecafilm.com/news-features/features/Taking_Off_and_Running_with_Nicole_Opper.html

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Taking 'Off and Running' with Nicole Opper

By Jenni Miller

Director Nicole Opper's documentary *Off and Running* (TFF 2009) began as a portrait of a unique family, but soon grew into so much more.

Director and producer **Nicole Opper's** documentary **Off and Running (TFF 2009)** began as a portrait of a young African-American teen, Avery, and her adoptive family, the Klein-Clouds: white Jewish moms Tova and Travis, multi-racial older brother Rafi, and Korean younger brother Zay-Zay (Isiah). However, when Avery makes the important decision to contact her birth mother, their family and her life change dramatically in front of Opper's lens. The unique relationship between Avery and her former teacher-turned-mentor offers a opportunity for insight into Avery's struggle to find her own identity in an already turbulent time of life.

Says Opper, "I had never met gay parents before when I met them. I knew I was gay, and I knew I wanted to have a family of my own, so I was instantly drawn to them as individuals and as a unit, and so all along, this has been so rewarding and enriching for me because I've been able to feel that, in a sense, I am preparing for my own future by having shaped this story."

Can you explain how you became involved with Avery and, more importantly, gained access to her family and her private life?

I met Avery first. She was 12 years old, and I was finishing up NYU film school. My thesis project was a documentary about a poet named Hannah Senesh, and Avery was attending this little private Jewish day school in Brooklyn called the Hannah Senesh Day School, so I went there to interview the kids and involve them in the project, and she jumped out and volunteered herself for an interview. And we had a lot of fun doing that. I wound up teaching a [film] class the next year for those kids, and she was in my class, so we were kind of first interviewer/interviewee, then quickly teacher/student. A few years later, after she'd gotten into high school and would come back and visit me now and then, we decided to embark on this project. But I did actually approach her parents first because she was only 16 at the time. And they sounded interested, so they had me over for dinner and we talked about what it would all mean and how long it might take—and they didn't believe me when I said it might take up to a few years [laughs]—and the next thing you know, we were filming.

What was Avery's involvement in the film-making process itself?

Avery became *really* involved in the creative process as we moved along and the reason that that happened—well, first it was a natural fit, because we were teacher and student in the beginning so I already felt passionate and invested in young people learning how to make their own media, so that was my approach with her from the beginning. But it was really not until she kind of disappeared from the project for a couple months and cut all communication with most of her family members and myself that our working relationship really transformed.

When she finally came back and said, "Okay, I'm ready to join you again and do this," I brought her in in a much more collaborative way and invited her into the edit room a lot, where she would offer her own feedback to footage we'd shot together. We'd have writing exercises where she'd kind of work out her narration, so she became really involved and invested and took ownership of her own story, and we ended up crediting her for that, as a co-writer of the film.

I know this was shot verite style, so you started with Avery and went from there, but did you have any idea of the drama that would unfold? I was pretty surprised.

I, too, was surprised at every turn. Going into this project, I envisioned it really just being this portrait of a young woman growing up in an interracial adoptive household with two lesbian moms. I wanted that reflected in the media, and I was excited about presenting a positive image of that, and, you know, quickly things just became a little more complicated and a lot more real than that... But I was absolutely shocked when Avery's life kind of began to unravel and I felt like I was barely keeping up. I was always just one step behind her as it was happening with the camera, having that constant negotiation of what do I shoot and what do I talk her through and try to help her through, and so we found this natural balance that felt right for both of us, which was to do a little bit of both. We had a lot of time in these last three years that we spent together [that] we spent off camera. So I think I was always first and foremost her mentor and secondly her filmmaker. [laughs]

As she grows estranged from her parents, they're less and less in the movie. Were you ever tempted to go talk to them on their own, whether as a friend or a filmmaker?

Absolutely, a little bit of both. I sat down and interviewed them alone in their house while Avery was kind of away, which was pretty uncomfortable for all of us. But I would also just check in with them all the time—on the phone, and I had a few brunches at the house when Avery was off doing her thing and finding her space—[but] I would say, much less so than the time that I spent with Avery, absolutely. And they understood that, and I think they were all for that, frankly. At that point, it was kind of like, the more adult mentors in her life helping her find her way, the better. And this was a strength of theirs as parents—they didn't feel the need to be managing every step that she took, and I think that that was ultimately why she ended up picking herself back up and moving forward, and her relationship with them now is much stronger.

You're very involved in youth filmmaking, particularly with [Tribeca All Access](#) and the mentorship program and the screening series.

Well, I'm a huge fan of the [Tribeca Film Institute](#), actually. [laughs] I thought it was amazing what was created for the youth of New York City at the Festival, and I haven't experienced that before, and I've been in a lot of other festivals, so the fact that there was a whole separate screening series just for public high school and middle school students was incredible. Avery came to every single one of those screenings, and she was treated like Beyonce. [laughs] People were standing up and cheering. That was so much fun for all of us... I've participated outside of the film with Lisa [Lucas]'s program... the [Youth Screening Series](#), the [Tribeca Film Fellows](#) program, and right now I'm also volunteering with [Reel Works](#) in Brooklyn, so I have a 15-year-old mentee who's making a film about not wanting to grow up, and she's in production right now. They're just a really incredible media program out in Park Slope. So I just love this work. It's invigorating for me; I feel like I learn from watching how kids choose to tell stories before they go through any kind of training or they're told how they're supposed to do it. It's so much fun to see what they come up with on their own.

The way you're describing how you worked with Avery reminds me a little bit of [Mike Leigh](#) or maybe [Andrea Arnold](#), and how they shape their actors' performances with the actors themselves—not to say Avery is an actor, but...

Yeah, I think a lot about... how documentary is so heavily influencing narrative filmmaking right now, but also, I think, the other way around. There were a lot of moments where I felt that Avery was, not necessarily performing for the camera, but she was well-aware of the medium she was working in, and she was well-aware of the need to create a narrative arc and to reach a resolution. You know, we may never know how much her awareness of that impacted her actions, or even the outcome of the film, but I think it's a really interesting thing to consider. And she got very, very good about directing herself and the people in the room in a scene... particularly when she started to get involved behind the camera and really become a player in the creation of the film. It would happen all the time where... she'd have a group of friends in the living room, they'd be in a conversation about something completely irrelevant to the film and she would kind of glance at me and steer it into something else, and in that sense, direct it. So I think that there's a lot of fiction in documentary. I'm one of those people who really enjoys the blurring of those lines, and I think that, ultimately, it's just about finding emotional truth, whether it's scripted or real. That was our goal all along, was to help [the] discovery of Avery's emotional truth.

That's fascinating, because the synergy there is—she's learning about herself and she's learning about filmmaking and she's learning how to express herself, both her own truth but also in a way manipulate it. She wanted a happy ending.

Absolutely.

And she got herself one.

And we talked about that all the time. "Avery, do you really want to end here? I've gotta finish up this film. We're actually on a deadline. We have funders. [laughs] Things need to happen. Is this how you want the movie to end?" We had those conversations... And I was manipulative too. I used that as motivation when she dropped out of school. It was sort of like, "Oh, we can't have *that* be the ending, Avery, so you better take that GED, girl! [laughs] You better get it together! You're gonna live with this movie forever."

Do you have any plans for a feature-length narrative?

It's so funny. Some people have asked whether I would try to turn this into a feature narrative, and I just, there's no way I could ever attempt that. I don't know where I would begin. But it has influenced some of the future projects I hope to make. My project coming up is a doc, and I'm headed to Mexico in a month or so to start filming at a home for boys who have been abandoned by their families, some of whom are in the States looking for work but others [who are] abusive, dealing with issues of drugs and alcohol. So these kids usually have lived on the streets for a while before they come to this home, which is this totally self-sustainable space where they're running a farm and, you know, making goat cheese and selling to cover their own cost of living and also doing amazingly well in school and usually going on to college. It's a real success story, so I'm excited to go embed there for a while and just live with these kids.

But yeah, I'm also beginning to write and outline a future script that follows a young African-American Jewish girl to Mexico to study abroad and she develops a really strong relationship with her home-stay mom. And I think you'll see a lot of Avery in that character.



Off and Running

TFF 09

[OFFAN] | 2009 | 78 min | Feature Documentary

Directed by: Nicole Opper

[USA](#)

World Premiere

Director: Nicole Opper

Screenwriter: Nicole Opper, Avery Klein-Cloud

Producer: Sharese Bullock, Nicole Opper

Executive Producers: Macky Alston, Sandra Itkoff

Director of Photography: Jacob Okada

Editor: Cheree Dillon

Music: Daniel Bernard Roumain

Program Notes

Avery is a typical Brooklyn teen living in an atypical, United Nations-style melting pot. Her adoptive parents are white Jewish lesbians, her younger brother is Korean, her older brother is mixed-race, and she is black. Though her household is loving, she can't quite quell her curiosity about her biological African-American roots. The decision to contact her birth mother sparks a complicated exploration of race and identity. As Avery's self-awareness increases, the question of racial identity takes center-stage. The more she searches for answers about her biological family, the more emotionally charged and distant from her current family she becomes. She maintains her position on the school track team, but drops out of high school and eventually leaves home.

Avery's constant displacement—whether it was at her Jewish elementary school, or among black friends, or even at home— informs her difficult journey, objectively documented by director Nicole Opper. Most impressive is Opper's poised camera, able to capture honest and articulate conversations between Avery and her incredibly attentive brother Rafi. *Off and Running* is a unique and very American coming-of-age story that delves into the psyche of race through a fresh and careful dissection of a family's struggle.

[*--Sara Nodjoumi*](#)

BAY AREA REPORTER

Highlights from the 8th annual San Francisco DocFest

Published 10/15/2009

by David Lamble

With over three dozen programs – 36 features and two shorts collections – the San Francisco DocFest (at the Roxie Cinema, Oct. 16-29) provides one of the most entertaining and thoughtful collections of nonfiction filmmaking on the subject of human obsessions. With most programs screening twice, here's my pick of four not to miss.

Off and Running Avery, an African American girl living with lesbian moms and two loving brothers in an upscale Brooklyn hood, would appear to have everything a teenager could possibly desire. Avery was adopted, as were her bi-racial, Princeton-bound brother and her Korean baby bro. Their moms, one American, one Israeli-born, have raised them as Jews, complete with Hebrew school and the tendency to question everything.

A letter from her birth-mom sudden throws a hitch into Avery's plans to attend college on a track scholarship. While her moms support her need to know more about her biological family, including a trip to their Austin, Texas home, Avery finds herself more confused than comforted, especially when communications from Austin abruptly cease. Director Nicole Opper uses her all-access pass inside this most diverse of families to explore just how important it is to know who you are before you can decide where your life is headed. (*Roxie, 10/18*)

VARIETY

<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117941467.html?categoryid=31&cs=1>

Posted: Tue., Oct. 27, 2009, 3:16pm PT

S.F. Doc Fest

Off and Running: An American Coming of Age Story

(Documentary)

By DENNIS HARVEY

A First Run Features release of a Nicole Opper Prods. and ITVS production in association with NBPC. Produced by Nicole Opper, Sharese Bullock. Co-producer, Jacob Akira Okada. Executive producers, Macky Altston, Sandra Itkoff. Directed by Nicole Opper. Screenplay, Avery Klein-Cloud, Opper.

With: Avery, Rafi, Zay-Zay, Travis and Tovah Klein-Cloud.

What at first looks like a heartwarming portrait of a highly blended modern family turns into a no less engrossing illustration of that situation's possible pitfalls in "Off and Running." Nicole Opper's documentary follows its teenage protag through tumultuous years during which her track star status, birth ethnicity and adoptive parentage all grow problematic. Stirring and accomplished pic has run the festival gamut already, looking to attract stellar reviews if modest theatrical biz as a First Run Features pickup, followed by DVD and broadcast exposure. Given up by a black mother from Austin, Texas, whom she discovers had four other (presumably not abandoned) children, Avery is raised in Brooklyn by an observant Jewish lesbian couple -- Midwesterner Travis and Israeli emigre Tovah -- alongside fellow adoptees Rafi (a mixed-race older brother) and Samuel, aka Zay-Zay (a much younger Korean boy). When first interviewed at age 16, she proudly says her family is called "the United Nations."

As the sole black girl in Hebrew school, later transferred to a high school sans any white students, she admits to feeling "very new to black culture, and I don't fully understand it." Her racial reidentification grows more and more potent, as contacting her birth mother (via adoption agency) proves initially positive, then very frustrating.

Avery responds with a classic if understandable case of adolescent angst and self-pity. She self-sabotages in various ways, her erstwhile confidant Rafi commenting (from his undergraduate spot at Princeton) that, "She feels like she was born into something. I feel like I can create who I want to be."

His confidence is admirable -- as her vulnerability is justifiable. There's considerable relief when, after some major missteps, Avery seems to be getting back on track at the end.

Assembly is first-rate, particularly in the editorial and music departments. Intimacy of the footage captured is no doubt partly due to the fact that Opper has known the family for years, starting as Avery's middle-school teacher, though this goes unmentioned onscreen.

Camera (color, DV), Jakob Akira Okada; editor, Cheree Dillon; music, Daniel Bernard Roumain; sound, Opper, Matthew Polis. Reviewed on DVD, San Francisco, Oct. 24, 2009. (In S.F. DocFest, SilverDocs, Outfest, Frameline, NewFest, Tribeca Film Festival.) Running time: 75 MIN.