

THE HAPPY HOUSE

A film by D.W. Young

80 minutes, English, HD, Color, USA, 2012



FIRST RUN FEATURES

The Film Center Building
630 Ninth Ave. #1213 | New York, NY 10036
(212) 243-0600 | Fax (212) 989-7649
www.firstrunfeatures.com
info@firstrunfeatures.com
www.firstrunfeatures.com/happyhouse

THE HAPPY HOUSE

A film by D.W. Young

It's the B&B you always dreaded, and that's on a normal day.



SYNOPSIS

Their relationship on the rocks, a young Brooklyn couple heads to a remote B&B to work things out. But from the moment they arrive at The Happy House it's one disaster after another, and they soon begin to suspect they've wandered into a real life horror movie. Events escalate from weird to terrifying as they contend with the house's batty owner, her imposing son, a moody Swedish lepidopterist, a pedantic English professor, an extraordinarily rare butterfly, the world's best blueberry muffins, a .44 Magnum, a demented serial killer, and one very strict rulebook.

CREDITS

Written and Directed by D.W. Young
Produced by Judith Mizrachy
Executive Producers Oliver Henzler, Evan Mizrachy and Dan Wechsler
Director of Photography Arlene Muller
Original Music by David Ullmann
Production Design Greg Meola
Casting by Kim Moarefi, CSA
Editor: D.W. Young
First Assistant Director: Dita Gruze
Sound Mixer: Michael O'Heney
Associate Producers: Kim Moarefi, J. Andrew Siegman
First Assistant Camera: Isaiah Fortajada
Second Assistant Camera: Paula O'Donnell
Gaffer: Philip Tartaglione
Key Grip: Dave Greenplate
Best Boy Electric: Andrew Joffe
Best Boy Grip: Max Joslyn
Sound Designer / Supervising Sound Editor / Sound Re-Recording Mixer: Ian Stynes
Foley, Dialogue and Sound Effects Editing: Houston Snyder, Geoff Vincent
Colorist: Joseph Mastantuono
Stunt Coordinator: David Shumbris
Special Makeup Effects Artist: Brian Spears
Script Supervisor: Vineet Verma
Visual Effects Artist: Adam Schwartz
Art Department Assistant: Page K. Chase
Production Assistants: Dustin Molina, Josh F. Cohen, Ivica Radulov, Jordan Rubin
Song by Zak Mering

Cast: Khan Baykal, Aya Cash, Marceline Hugot
Kathleen McNenny, Oliver Henzler, Mike Houston, Charles Borland
Stivi Paskoski, Curtis Shumaker, Leah Lawrence, Luca B. Henzler

BIOS

D.W. Young (Writer/Director)

D.W. Young is a Brooklyn based filmmaker who has written, directed, and edited both narrative and documentary films. His previous film, the short NOT INTERESTED (2010), premiered at SXSW before screening at such festivals as Sarasota, Provincetown, Vancouver, LA Shorts, Cleveland, and Maryland. NOT INTERESTED was also nominated for a 2010 Casting Society of America Artios Award. His documentary short AMI UNDERGROUND (2009) was selected as the opening night short for the ever popular Movies With a View in Brooklyn Bridge Park and also screened in Paris as part of Festival Cinérail. Young also recently served as a producer on Peter Bolte's upcoming feature ALL ROADS LEAD. He made his directorial debut with the award-winning documentary A HOLE IN A FENCE (First Run Features, 2008), which chronicles the changing landscape of small corner of Red Hook, Brooklyn.

Khan Baykal (Joe)

Khan Baykal previously collaborated with D.W. Young playing the lead in his short NOT INTERESTED. Other credits include DUPLICITY directed by Tony Gilroy, and Kevin Connolly's GARDENER OF EDEN, and he will be seen in the upcoming Michaël Roskam film THE DROP and Lawrence Michael Levine's WILD CANARIES. His television credits include "The Black Donnellys," "Kidnapped," "Law & Order," "Law & Order: Criminal Intent," "Third Watch," and "Blue Bloods." Khan studied with Suzanne and Bill Esper at The William Esper Studio.

Aya Cash (Wendy)

Aya Cash recently appeared in Mike Birbiglia's Sundance hit SLEEPWALK WITH ME and Martin Scorsese's Oscar nominated THE WOLF OF WALL STREET, and will be seen in the upcoming Judd Apatow produced film CAN A SONG SAVE YOUR LIFE?. Her stage credits include The Atlantic Theater Company's "Happy Hour" written by Ethan Coen, "Seminar" alongside Jeff Goldblum, and Joe Mantello's "The Other Place" with Laurie Metcalf. Aya played Callie in the Fox TV series "Traffic Light", and recently appeared in the recurring part of Shelly Wexler on Season 2 of HBO's "The Newsroom".

Marceline Hugot (Hildie)

Marceline Hugot has appeared in numerous films including ALICE, UNITED 93, FUR, JULIE & JULIA, THE DISCOVERERS, THE MESSENGER and TO WONG FOO THANKS FOR EVERYTHING, JULIE NEWMAR. She has appeared on TV series including "Boardwalk Empire", "Sex and the City" and "ER" and "The Onion News Network". She has also been a regular on "30 Rock" since 2007 playing the eccentric Kathy Geiss.

Film Review: *The Happy House*

Wonderfully droll horror comedy with a memorably weird cast of characters.

May 2, 2013
-By David Noh



“Leave, just leave!” How many times have you wanted to yell that at movie characters, from *The Haunting* to *The Shining* and beyond, who stay and stay in places that are obviously rife with evil spirits? Actually, in *The Happy House*, Wendy (Aya Cash) tries to do just that by fleeing the sinister B&B she has checked into, leaving behind her far more accommodating, infuriating

husband Joe (Khan Baykal). But darned if her car doesn’t break down, bringing her back to this dread inn of iniquity.

Debut feature director/writer D.W. Young has created a puckishly diverting horror comedy, fully in the tradition of the great James Whale, who also loved to inject perversely unexpected humor into his chill factor. The final third, when the scares really set in, is the weakest part of the movie, but Young manages to sustain things overall with admirable poise and sneaky charm.

Young sketches an unlikely gallery of characters whom he clearly revels in and who are nearly as memorable as those in Whale’s deliriously twisted *The Old Dark House*. Besides feisty urbanite Wendy and terminally laid-back Joe, whose marriage is, unsurprisingly, on the rocks, there’s the dominating, purse-mouthed innkeeper Hildie (Marceline Hugot, quite magnificent), with her mingily doled out “best blueberry muffins in the world” (ubiquitous bane of all B&Bs) and her puritanical, endless book of rules forbidding swearing, spirits and basically anything resembling fun. The sole other guest is a Swedish lepidopterist bearing the immediately giggle-inducing name of Mr. Hverven (Oliver Henzler, nearly as droll as Christoph Waltz might have been in this role). And then there’s Hildie’s menacing hulk of an axe-wielding son, Skip (Mike Houston), and Linda (Kathleen McNenny), her blessedly irreverent sister.

This garrulously eccentric group—all of whom are eventually dumbfounded by the eventual turn of events—make for some amazingly agreeable company. After viewing *The Happy House*, however, one may seriously question any future notion of ever staying in one of those oh-so-“charming” roadside nooks filled with welcoming faces and the smell of freshly baked goodies in the air.

SLANT

"Writer-director D.W. Young pulls an impressive hat trick with *The Happy House*, a horror-comedy that's authentically misleading until a pivotal moment that firmly establishes the film as a thriller in which a requisite motley cast of characters are bumped off one by one, somewhat in the tradition of *Ten Little Indians*, in a requisite remote location. Up until that point, though, Young has run the tonal gamut from a Jarmuschian portrait of youthful stasis to a comedy of remarriage to a fish-out-of-water sitcom to a (mild) satire of contemporary America as an increasingly remote and indecisive country of gun nuts and limousine liberals."

- Chuck Bowen

CRITERIONCAST

"With a taut script that blends terror and comedy with a rather shockingly assured hand ... *The Happy House* is chock full of interesting performances and, for those who go along for the ride visually (like this writer most certainly did), this will be a really great and perfectly toned thriller comedy." - Joshua Brunsting

THE FILM STAGE

"Achieves a clever, sneaky rhythm. If the first half ultimately succeeds as a kind of mild-mannered purgatory, equal parts *Full House* and *The Exterminating Angel*, it is the second half descent into an honestly involving slasher film that solidifies Young's quirky little experiment." - Nathan Bartlebaugh

the village VOICE

"Likable... ironic. 30 Rock vet Marceline Hugot is indelible as the B&B's cheery proprietor." - Michael Atkinson

Indiewire

"The surprising quietness of this horror film somehow works: it adds a touch of irony to the otherwise largely familiar tropes on screen." - Emma Bernstein

THE **Hollywood** *REPORTER*

"Marceline Hugot is a hoot as the Bible-spouting proprietress." – Frank Scheck

GRANTLAND

"One of the 10 Summer Horror Films on Our Radar. Why? Because these things are innately terrifying: B&B's, cuckoo clocks, lepidopterists in khaki vests, and eating dinner with strangers." - Tess Lynch

Interview

"A well-lit, cheeky black-horror comedy." - Hannah Mandel



"Entertaining and rewarding. Absolutely charming thanks to a well-written cast of characters played by a group of actors who are all game." - Daniel Hernandez



"A shocking success! A unique melding of light comedy and dark suspense, The Happy House soars when D.W. Young focuses on playing with his audiences' expectations. Smart writing and a collection of wonderful performances."
- Doug Tilley

TRUSTMOVIES

"A lot of charm... a relationship rom-com meets the man of your worst nightmare, with a whole group of off-the-cuff-and-off-the-wall characters bounding around the periphery." - James van Maanen



"The self-awareness at play in this movie is refreshing and honest. The in-jokes for genre fans are subtle, hidden in the background, not laid out brazenly on the table. This is a GREAT late addition to 2013's killer class of horror brilliance. I cant wait to see it again." - Charlie JJ Kruger



"Finally, the comedy/horror film this reviewer has been waiting for. 'The Happy House' is original in every way, shape, and form." - Ken Tasho



INTERVIEW: DIRECTOR D.W. YOUNG INVITES US INTO THE HAPPY HOUSE

Oct 11, 2013



You might find it hard to pin down D.W. Young. Making a splash a few years back with his documentary *A HOLE IN THE FENCE* – which examined the changing fortunes of an abandoned industrial area in Red Hook, New York – Young spends much of his time as a freelance editor, while making time to direct the occasional comedic short film. With *THE HAPPY HOUSE* he makes his feature debut, and these varied experiences have paid off in a wonderful, unique horror/comedy that will keep audiences on their toes. Young took some time out of his busy schedule to discuss how he keeps his work grounded reality, dressing a bed & breakfast on a budget, and dealing with smart characters in a horror setting.

Sweetback (SB): *THE HAPPY HOUSE* is a difficult film to pin down. It's ostensibly a horror-comedy, but very different in tone and pacing from the sort of horror-comedies that fans of genre films have come to expect. Were you consciously trying to avoid the cliches of the genre when writing it?

D.W. Young (DY): A lot of horror comedies are pretty upfront with their method. They tend to be explicitly self-conscious and direct in their poking fun at cliché. So almost immediately in, say, *THE CABIN IN THE WOODS*, you read the signs and get the central joke and from

there on it's mainly an ongoing development of that thread. Which works great and the enjoyment is in the inventiveness of the details. But at the end of the day you're in a relatively comfortable place as a viewer once you latch on.

That's one thing I wanted to play with a little bit, that sense of viewer comfort. I wanted people to be asking themselves "What movie am I really in here?". At one point well into the film you might even be wondering if it's going to be a horror movie at all. Which is a bit risky and probably not something you'd get to do in a big budget film. At face value the setup is absolutely by the book classic and contains many of the cliches of the genre. And there, in reference to your question, I guess I was technically embracing those cliches on one level. But I'd prefer to think of them as basic conventions because it's really cliched response to convention that's where things turn mediocre. It's not like anyone is ever going to fault THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY for ending on a shootout.

And so that kind of cliched response is what I was interested in avoiding, or at least shading differently. Structurally the film is often intentionally unorthodox – there's a degree of rearrangement and delay that's meant to disrupt you. The tone in particular takes a pretty sharp swerve at one point, which I'm sure won't be acceptable to everyone, but hopefully to some people it will be reinvigorating.

SB: Without going into spoilery specifics, what I most loved about the film is the way in which it cheerfully plays with audience expectations. Even the two central characters – Joe and Wendy – seem to expect things to play out in a more traditionally horrific manner. Was it enjoyable to build in these intentional misdirections?

DY: Absolutely. I think half the pleasure of either making or watching a good genre film is having your expectations tweaked. To me the greatest sin of all is to be totally predictable. I'd love to talk about some of the subtler instances in the film but I'll refrain for spoilers sake. One thing we did incorporate into the movie is the degree to which we are all, in real life, conditioned to the conventions of horror movies. So obviously if your car breaks down near a lonely old motel with a really creepy desk attendant you're going to be expecting a kitchen knife in the shower. You'll be joking about it with your traveling companion and it probably won't happen but you'll probably take a few precautions just in case.

But not only do we know how to read these signs, our awareness is so culturally heightened we're inclined to actually impose them on innocent situations. Which is why Wendy sees menace around every corner. Of course, on the flip side, it can be infuriating in some horror movies when nobody displays this basic awareness, which would easily allow them to survive or escape or bypass any danger in the first place.

Either way the fact is cinema is now like a layer of interpretation on top of reality you can't truly ignore.

SB: Was the title THE HAPPY HOUSE a reference to the Siouxsie and the Banshees song “Happy House”? Or were you just looking for the most innocuous possible name for a Bed and Breakfast?

DY: It was the latter. But it’s also a little morsel of bait – as in nothing that sounds so innocent possibly could be. Plus a tongue in cheek joke on the fact that Wendy hates B&B’s and is fighting with her boyfriend and there doesn’t look to be much happy about their stay going into it.

SB: Can you talk a little about casting Marceline Hugot as Hildie, in the film? It’s such a sincere, even heartbreaking, performance. Much more sympathetic and nuanced than one normally gets in this sort of film. How did she get onboard?

DY: Marceline is an extremely talented actress and was an absolute pleasure to work with. She was brought in by our casting director Kim Moarefi and I thought she had a great take on Hildie. Along with her basic sweetness, Marceline has this wonderful touch of edge to her that I thought really fit the role.

To me it’s far more horrible to have a character you care about, even if it’s only a touch fondly, suffer than it is a two dimensional stock type (which often only furthers your disconnect from the actual action on screen). I think if a horror movie wants to be really powerful, that’s important, and although that level of dramatic intensity isn’t really the main function of THE HAPPY HOUSE, we wanted to achieve an unexpected moment or two of it, and Marceline is central to that .

SB: In so many horror films there’s a tendency to heighten the reality, but aside from the introduction of an escaped lunatic, things here are rooted very clearly in a recognizable world. How important was this level of restraint for maintaining the drama – and threat – for the characters?

DY: I always felt it was important. In every way the film is opposed to the superhuman. Even our seemingly larger than life serial killer is bound to the laws of reality. Everything is a bit messy and random, heroics are modest at best.

I think you need to have some degree of honesty in your characters reaction to crazy moments and violent encounters or they quickly turn comic book. Which is totally cool if that’s what you’re doing, but even then the best comic book characters work because you care about the characters, and that’s a result of a kind of honesty in their depiction, so there’s always value in playing certain things straight.

And I think it’s worth noting that nobody ever does anything really incomprehensibly stupid in the film, which can be maddening and really undermine the potency of dramatic situations on screen. They’re essentially all just victims of bad luck.

SB: The actual B&B makes for a wonderful location for the action. How did you end up getting access to it, and did it require much dressing? Those cuckoo clocks certainly make for an interesting addition.

DY: We were going to use a different place initially, but it fell through and then our location scout Stephen Harris found us this house in Upstate NY and saved the day. It's an actual working B&B, and by a stroke of luck they had two weeks open just after the summer season and we rented it out for that stretch (we shot the film in a very fast 14 days).

Our art budget was really tiny, so we had to be very targeted with our dressing, and I think our Production Designer Greg Meola did a great job stretching it as far as he could. It's a grand old house with much of the original detailing, so we took advantage of that as much as possible, just tilting things here and there to play up various elements. The cuckoo clocks were in the script and the one major element we added. And all the candlelight stuff is a kind of no-budget, old fashioned way of taking advantage of what darkness has to offer.

It's funny though because its really a very normal, cheery place full of kids and life.

SB: For those interested in checking out THE HAPPY HOUSE or your other works, what's the best way for them to do so?

DY: THE HAPPY HOUSE just came out on [itunes](#), [amazon](#) and most of the other [online streaming sites](#), plus a fair number of cable VOD providers. Netflix and DVD will be in January. My short NOT INTERESTED, which is kind of a spiritual predecessor to the film involving a door to door knife salesman who gets into some trouble, is also on [itunes](#) and [amazon](#) and will be included on the DVD as a special feature.

SB: Any upcoming projects on the horizon we should be looking out for?

DY: I'm putting the final touches on a short I shot over the summer called SWEATING IN THE NIGHT, my third collaboration with Khan Baykal (who plays Joe). It's a kind of surreal fever dream of the 80's and high school, much more stylized than THE HAPPY HOUSE. And I have a couple of new feature scripts that I'm going to start trying to get off the ground now, one that's a kind of noirish thriller set at a shady funeral home.

SB: While you've been directing shorts and documentaries for years, this is your first full length feature. What advice might you have for young or inexperienced directors looking to tackle their first feature?

DY: Well I actually came to filmmaking a bit later than most, from writing short fiction, and had only ever shot two days of narrative with the tiniest of crews before this, so it was certainly a leap in many ways. I guess I'd say that in my opinion there's no inherently right or wrong way to make a film and be careful of anyway who tells you too insistently otherwise.

Living on Set at a Hudson Valley B&B by D.W. Young

To some degree or another, to shoot a film is also to live it. In our case, location made that especially true. Like many low budget films, *The Happy House* is set mostly within a single location, a remote and somewhat bizarre B&B. It's a common approach for good reason: you don't have to move cast and crew around a lot, which is always expensive and time consuming, and it keeps your location rental costs low or possibly even free. The less specific the location the better - a suburban house being much easier to arrange than a lighthouse of course. For horror films in particular, the single location is a longstanding convention, and one which we wanted to embrace in our own particular way.

I had always anticipated we would be able to find a suitably affordable spot without difficulty. To do so, we enlisted the help of a great location scout who was game to work with our limited budget. After a few weeks and many options considered, it became clear there was nothing simple about our search. Inevitably, money was the first problem - our indie budget greatly limited our options. Size and interior space were the next most common issues - too many of the old houses were too small to match the script, and also would have presented serious shooting issues. As our deadline grew near, our location scout expanded his criteria to include actual B&B's (which we had more or less discounted, expecting too many availability and cost issues).

More time passed and then one day he sent me some images of a wonderful old house outside the town of Blooming Grove, NY. However, The Dominion House was a functioning B&B, so it sounded improbable. Our scout then related that the dates we were looking for were just off season enough that they weren't booked yet and if we rented the entire place out it we could have it for two weeks straight. The cost was at the cap of our budget, but doable.

As soon as possible we met the owners, Joe and Kathy Spear, who although a little trepidatious, were open to having us film there. The house proved to be a great find indeed, with much family history (Joe grew up there) as well as original furniture still in place. Our scout had saved us and we soon signed a contract.

Aware of the kind of destruction film productions can cause, we were firmly resolved to prevent this, doubly so considering the original detailing of the house, and we conveyed our commitment to leave the house as we found it. And, with a lot of extra care by all our crew, we were able to achieve this (in the end, unbelievably, the only casualty was a small lamp glass). Even so, I think Joe and Kathy were a bit surprised at the amount of equipment and garbage even a small production like ours entails. Trying to contain plastic water bottles on film sets is kind of like bailing water out of a sinking boat. But they were wonderfully good sports about it all.

Being a very low-budget production, saving money was a top priority wherever possible. And one of the biggest expenses of a location shoot is lodging, so we decided to house myself, our producer Judith Mizrachy and two of our actors, Khan Baykal and Oliver Henzler, at the location. For the actors it was a chance to stay focused, and also for all of us to spend some of our free time hanging out together. It also meant Khan and Oliver began to develop an odd sense of living in the movie, and that Judith and I never really stepped away from the production, which isn't always healthy. Sometimes I'd wake up and wonder: where the hell am I?

So our circumstances were intense but also memorable. Routines developed, not unlike they would have had we simply been on vacation (what a funny thought...). Mornings we would groggily descend for coffee in the kitchen like regular old guests. Evenings we would all share a couple of glasses of wine after the day wrapped and I would review dailies, and I now recall this strange bubble within the greater bubble of the production with great fondness. When Khan, our lead actress Aya Cash, Judith and I did make it out to catch *Drive* at the local mall on a day off late in filming, it felt like stepping out of a dream (and then into another cinematic dream of LA).

Of course, the actual Dominion House is nothing like the Happy House of the film. Kathy and Joe are gracious, laid back and generous hosts whose only rule is that you enjoy yourself (unlike Hildie, the proprietress of the Happy House, whose rules are many and quite detailed and carry consequences...). There are often kids running around, not serial killers, and the place has a relaxed, lived in vibe, not the eccentric and increasingly claustrophobic one of the film. Deer often hang out in the backyard. And, unlike the Happy House, it's notably free of cuckoo clocks.

The idea to make cuckoos one of the distinguishing characteristics of Hildie's house actually came from a real life B&B experience Oliver had had a few years back. We've known each other for years and he'd once mentioned how a place he'd stayed at in Vermont was literally lined with cuckoos, a nutty detail I filed away. To be honest, it sounded like a nightmare, and just the kind of thing to drive a couple of snarky New Yorkers like the two lead characters crazy - and then, when taken to another level, turn discomfotingly weird and also comically startling. And there's a long tradition of clocks in film, particularly suspense and horror films, but even in comedies like *3 O'Clock High* and Wilder's *One, Two Three*, and I wanted to tap into that. They can be a way to enhance suspense, to be sure, but I also hoped to create an awareness of the viewer's experience of time both narratively within the film and also more self-consciously as part of the act of watching it. Most of the clocks we used I bought on ebay, but one was actually an old one from my grandmother's house and it was nice to have that personal connection.

Much of the humor in the film arises from misunderstandings between city and

country people - that old culture clash. From the start Wendy is annoyed at being forced to stay at a B&B, something she disdainfully makes known at every chance she can. And at first glance Skip and Hildie are just the sort of overbearing country bumpkins that sophisticated urbanites dread. But when they prove to be more complicated than they appear, many of Wendy's preconceptions must be modified too. B&B's aren't generally my cup of tea either, I will admit, but I've stayed at some very nice ones and some less so. Like anything, they run the gamut but are clearly victims of their most extreme cases. And there's plenty to poke fun at there to be sure, (*Portlandia* did some great skits recently) but if it's only cheap, low-blows, that gets boring pretty fast.

Amusingly, I think many of the cast and crew came in with attitudes not unlike Wendy's and left feeling quite differently. Everyone was incredibly impressed by our hosts' patience and goodwill as we stomped around their home day and night, blacking out their windows and moving all their furniture around. Kathy became almost a kind of mother to the production. She happily baked muffins to be used for several scenes as the "best blueberry muffins in the world", and remarkably they were some of the best we'd ever tasted. Khan and Aya had to eat tons of them for one scene, a new one each take, and I know they were glad they were so good! And at one point Kathy came to the rescue and sewed the badge on the costume for our local policeman because our production designer was unavailable and of course no one else on the crew knew how to sew. She even loaned us her car for a scene. And when it came to firing some blank gunshots off in the house, we were concerned it might be too noisy for them but Kathy laughed and said Joe shoots gophers in the backyard and she's used to it.

We started production soon after Hurricane Irene and the area was hard hit. The Dominion House was fortunately spared major damage, but Kathy and Joe's daughter's house was totally flooded, and all over people were dealing with really tough situations. The train line that normally services the area was closed indefinitely, and many roads were impassable weeks after the storm, so transporting people to set wasn't easy either. We even lost all our local PA's for the start of the shoot because of the storm. But despite all of this turmoil, Joe and Kathy remained good sports and delivered everything they'd promised and more and we really couldn't have done it without them. We shot the film in a breakneck fourteen days and I try not to even think about how much riskier would have been with less understanding hosts.

Looking back it's funny just how burned into memory the little details and quirks of The Dominion House are. Over those two weeks many lines were blurred - between the real life functioning B&B we slept in once the crew went home, the busy, cable-strewn world of production that took over every morning, and the fantasy B&B captured by the lens - and all in a way that's wonderfully particular to filmmaking and inextricably woven into the fabric of *The Happy House*.