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Article

Ed Asner, a Passionate Crusader for Victims of 9/11, Makes a Statement with the Film "Zack's Machine"

By Allison Kugel, Senior Editor - August 19, 2007

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I recently had the opportunity to screen a short film called *Zack's Machine* which has been making the rounds on this year's film festival circuit. This 9 minute short, written and directed by a gifted up and coming filmmaker named Kenneth Sheetz, takes a poignant look at the events of September 11, 2001 from the perspective of a tiny puppy who finds herself alone and trapped in her New York City apartment when her new master, Zack, goes missing on 9/11. Although short in length, this film packs a powerful punch and works its way into your heart. The entire film plays out from the puppy's point of view. We watch her master Zack go through his typical morning routine, which includes putting out food and water for puppy Sophia and playing with her for a bit, before heading out the door to his job in lower Manhattan at the World Trade Center. Moments later sirens begin to blare and chaos ensues in the city and these disturbing sounds are heard through the apartment alerting the tiny dog to possible imminent danger.

Zack's phone rings and his answering machine records a frantic message from his mother who is far away and desperately trying to piece together her son's whereabouts. You can hear the terror and heartache in her voice as the camera focuses on Zack's confused puppy. The incomparable Ed Asner is suddenly and distinctively heard through the answering machine as Zack's father. He is urgently trying to come to the rescue and announces that he and Zack's mother will be driving from Chicago to New York since there is no other way to confirm the safety of their son. Asner's character makes a regretful and guilt ridden admission into the machine expressing his deep remorse at his distant relationship with Zack. You can hear the pleading in the weary tone of his voice. All the while, puppy Sophia's big eyes express a palpable vulnerability as she senses that her master is in trouble and she is trapped with little food and water. Using all of her might, she escapes her crate and manages to search the apartment for food, water and a sense of safety and comfort. Eventually, through a series of events we see the dog struggling throughout the apartment and getting into trouble trying to fend for



Ed Asner

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Danny Masterson Stars in Men At

herself as days pass. We hear Ed Asner's voice on the answering machine once again to announce an unfortunate delay in his and his wife's trip to New York. The answering machine becomes Zack's parents' only lifeline in their desperate attempts to reach their son. The fear in their voices is piercing to the soul, as is the expression in Zack's puppy's eyes.

In speaking with the writer and director of *Zack's Machine*, Ken Sheetz, he tells me of the inspiration behind this short yet incredibly moving film. "Many animals were trapped in their apartments that perished, because their masters went missing on 9/11. There were animal rescue workers who were searching the city and rescued lost pets. This film is dedicated to them." As Sheetz continues on, he repeats the tagline that he chose for *Zack's Machine*, "People weren't the only ones who lost friends on 9/11."

I went on to then discuss this film with veteran actor Ed Asner, who contributed his incredible talent to *Zack's Machine*, as the voice of Zack's distressed father.

PR.com (Allison Kugel): What attracted you to this film?

Ed Asner: I liked the idea of it and the music of it. I saw the rough cut of [the film] when Ken Sheetz was approaching me to do the voice of the father and gladly agreed. It was a very interesting approach to that tragic day.



Sophia, the Puppy in "Zack's Machine"

PR.com: You've been involved in a lot of causes surrounding 9/11 and you have been on some committees. Can you tell me about that?

Ed Asner: I am one of those conspiracy nuts. I feel that even though no culpability may have been pointed to anybody in high places, I feel that the investigation that has taken place and the rationalization for the various occurrences of 9/11 have not been properly explained. I think that they need to be thoroughly grilled, roasted, basted, boiled... until a finer sounding truth occurs in each of the steps that helped create the great suspicion of misfeasance or malfeasance on September 11th.

PR.com: Do you feel that some fault lies with our federal intelligence and with the Bush Administration?

Ed Asner: All of them. The army, certainly the air force... the thing that fascinates me, and I listened to all the unanswered questions on the science of 9/11, is the fact that even though there was no actual culpability, there may have been some bad performance of jobs, and yet not one head has rolled for the fact that this atrocity was committed without interruption.

PR.com: And you were one of many people to sign a petition to re-open an investigation into the events surrounding 9/11. Was anything accomplished by that?



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Ed Asner: Not yet, but more signatures are being had and with the political breakdown as it now occurs, with insufficient strength in the Senate and certainly in the Executive Branch and in the Supreme Court, there will have to be a greater political balance to allow such new inquiry.

PR.com: Getting back to the film, how did you happen to meet Ken Sheetz, the writer and director of *Zack's Machine*?

Ed Asner: I think he met me through a series of readings I do with Alexandra More in L.A. at two Jewish Community Centers. I think he introduced himself to me at one of those events.

PR.com: What are your thoughts, in general, on continuing to chronicle the events of 9/11 on film and other media?

Ed Asner: Wherever I feel it's rational and well researched, I will always make myself available.



Ed Asner

PR.com: What do you hope people take away from watching this short film?

Ed Asner: I hope that it comes across well, above all. That it is proved to be artistic and intriguing, just by the unusual nature of it.

PR.com: This film stirred up some pretty disturbing feelings in me, to tell you the truth. I'm an animal lover. It's interesting because that fear of possibly being in the wrong place at the wrong time, one of the things that occurs to me is, "What would happen to my dog?" Then of course, hearing the mother's voice, and hearing a parent seem so unbelievably helpless because she can't be there to make sure that her child is safe...

Ed Asner: I carry some guilt on it myself, because I did not treat gently a friend of mine who was in that neighborhood. I was a little too abrupt...

PR.com: Before 9/11?

Ed Asner: No, after. I did not allow myself to understand the total terror and grief of the people who suffered. I'm a man very prone to guilt.

PR.com: Perhaps it was a defense mechanism on your part, or just being in shock. You screened *Zack's Machine* from beginning to end... what kinds of feelings or thoughts came up in you and what did you take away from it?

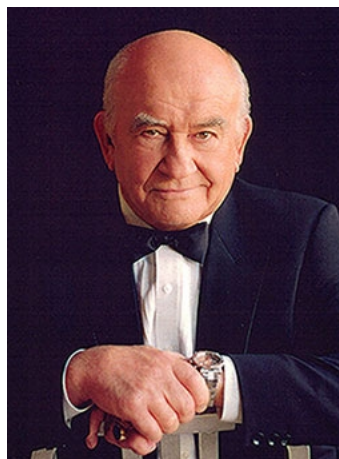
Ed Asner: It is a strange film and I realized I had to do my part maintaining or contributing, in an appropriate way, to the mystique of the film.

PR.com: When tragedy occurs, how do you personally go about pulling the positive or some type of hope out of the situation? What's your process?

Ed Asner: I've been blessed. I have not suffered other than the usual deaths that we encounter. I find myself so far, accepting them calmly and rationally. I would say, getting back to your statement about your dog, in a strange way I think we're more affected by the death of a pet than a human.

PR.com: How so?

Ed Asner: Well, I'm thinking of the pets that undergo untimely demises, and most humans really don't and when they do, we have a long time to adjust to their passing. And somebody once said that we have pets to prepare us for our own passing or our own losses.



Ed Asner

PR.com: I think that they also teach us what love is in its most pure form. At this point in your career, what do you look for in general in a film or television role, or in a story?

Ed Asner: If I'm not intrigued by the character in the script then I don't want to do it.

PR.com: Is there a certain type of character that intrigues you?

Ed Asner: If his lines are music, and you can tell right away... or if you love the vantage point from which he speaks his truth. That's the first thing, and then hopefully the rest of the piece that he's involved in will match it in attractiveness.

The trailer for Zack's Machine can be viewed at <http://myspace.com/zacksmachine> or <http://www.ifilm.com/video/2879476>

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