

STEPHANIE SAYS

Filmmaker Hilary Brougher's *Stephanie Daley*

by Sarah Coleman Photograph by Hillary Harvey

A cold, cold day in New York City. Sheets of icy wind whip around each street corner, and the puddles in the gutters have frozen solid. Reaching the amply heated East Village apartment of director and Catskills native Hilary Brougher is a huge relief. A warm smile lights up her face. “You made it!” she announces, ushering me into a cramped, cozy living room with yellow and purple walls. Finger paintings by Brougher’s five-year-old twins, Violet and Guthrie, decorate the doorways, and on the bookshelves, Dr. Seuss shares space with Sylvia Plath. “What can I get you? A cup of tea? Honey with that, or sugar?” Brougher’s manner is so nurturing, and the environment so snug, that it’s tempting to ask for hot chocolate with marshmallows and a bedtime story.

Motherhood is a big part of Brougher’s identity; it’s also at the core of her new film, *Stephanie Daley*, which screens this month at Upstate Films in Rhinebeck. But there’s nothing cozy or calm about the movie, which examines the fear and ambivalence that can haunt even the most wanted pregnancy.

Filmed in the Hudson Valley, *Stephanie Daley* traces the relationship between Stephanie (Amber Tamblyn), a teenage girl who has concealed a pregnancy and stands accused of murdering her baby, and Lydie (Tilda Swinton), a forensic psychologist who’s hired to interview Stephanie for her competency hearing. Their interviews are complicated by the fact that Lydie is expecting a baby herself, and suffered a stillbirth the previous year. Lydie’s unresolved grief about the stillbirth is creating difficulties in her marriage to Paul (Timothy Hutton).

With its ripped-from-the-headlines premise (“Teen Mom Accused of Baby’s Murder!”), *Stephanie Daley* could have been a one-note melodrama. Instead, it’s a subtle, delicate film that explores issues of guilt and responsibility, and the two lead actresses turn in powerful performances. Set partially in the Hudson Valley—with locations ranging from Hunter Mountain ski resort to Oteora Park—the movie captures a strong and distinct sense of place, particularly in the

bleak winter landscapes captured by cinematographer David Morrison, which infuse the film with an air of gentle melancholy.

Exorcism

I propose to Brougher that it’s unusual to see such a deep, insightful exploration of pregnancy on the big screen, where gravid women are usually either the butt of jokes (*Look Who’s Talking*) or vessels for horror-movie monsters (*Rosemary’s Baby*). “Actually, one person told me that *Stephanie Daley* has the scariest childbirth scene since *Alien*,” she says, and laughs—a warm, throaty chuckle that makes her bobbed red hair dip up and down.

Setting a steaming mug of peppermint tea in front of me, Brougher settles into place on a futon-sofa with a patchwork cover, wrapping her legs beneath her, yoga style. She’s dressed in jeans and a gray T-shirt, with a purple hooded sweatshirt on top—soccer mom meets East Village writer. She apologizes for the toys left strewn around by the twins, who are currently at the neighborhood preschool. Shiny tambourines, plastic animals, and boxes of rainbow-colored markers are strewn across the floor. “I really learned to stick to the point when those two kids came into my life,” she says, rolling her eyes in self-deprecation. “I’d be nursing them and typing with one finger. And it was like, whatever I typed with that one finger mattered *a lot*.”

When she wrote *Stephanie Daley*, though, Brougher had never been pregnant. Her points of reference came from thirty-something friends who’d shifted gears from high-powered careers to pregnancy. “Their whole identity was going through a massive transformation,” she says. “It was fascinating to watch women who I consider, and who consider themselves, in control, go up against that which you can’t control and can’t know.” Working on the screenplay allowed her to explore her response to those friends, along with her own questions about



ABOVE: TILDA SWINTON AND TIMOTHY HUTTON IN A SCENE FROM *STEPHANIE DALEY*.
OPPOSITE: FILMMAKER HILARY BROUGHER AND HER CHILDREN.

motherhood. Years later, when she became pregnant, she “was able to let go of my anxieties quite quickly. Because I’d already worked through them—all of that stuff had been exorcised.”

An Education at Upstate Films

Brougher has a soft, musical voice that’s almost girlish—on first blush, she doesn’t seem like someone who’d write tough, surprisingly unorthodox screenplays. But as her films effectively point out, people are infinitely more complicated than they first appear. In her own case, there are obvious layers of complexity: She’s a shy girl turned confident filmmaker, a happy mother who can get into the head of a woman driven to commit infanticide.

Tamblyn, the gifted 24-year-old actress who plays the title role, thinks that Brougher has a striking talent for delving into ambiguity. “I think the hardest thing to do in the world is write the gray areas, the areas of our lives where God lies, within the things we can’t explain,” she says. “Hilary attacks all of it with simplicity, truth, and danger.”

Brougher started making films in adolescence, when shyness prevented her from relating well to her peers. In her parents’ house, just outside Woodstock, there was a large basement where she could construct cardboard sets for her Super-8 films. MTV was just taking off, and Brougher made her own surreal pop videos, conscripting other arty adolescents to be her actors. “Working with other awkward, arty kids was a big part of my meager self-development,” she says. Directing movies gave her a place in the social hierarchy; it was also fun. “We used a lot of hairspray and eye shadow,” she recalls.

She also found refuge on weekends at Upstate Films, where her parents would take her to see almost every film on the calendar, “unless it was obviously, wildly inappropriate.” She loved the opening of *Nosferatu*, with its chilling images of

bones in a crypt. “I learned that powerful visual images, on their own, could speak volumes,” she says. The influence has played out in her own films—for example, in the opening moments of *Stephanie Daley*, where we see a girl stumbling across a snowy hillside, a trail of bloody footprints left in her wake. “It’s important to create connection and emotion using images,” Brougher says.

Over the years, Brougher has tried her hand at writing science fiction, horror, and historical drama. “I love genre movies,” she says. “It’s difficult to get anything made, so you have to try a bit of everything.” This polyglot tendency developed after she graduated in filmmaking from the School of Visual Arts, where she met her husband, cinematographer Ethan Mass. The school emphasized production skills over screenwriting, so after graduating Brougher spent years teaching herself to write screenplays by trial and error, paying the rent by working occasional production jobs as a script supervisor and story editor.

Eventually, the production company Good Machine picked up her screenplay *The Sticky Fingers of Time*, a time-travel fantasy involving a blocked writer, a lesbian love affair, and the H-bomb. Filmed in both black-and-white and color, *Sticky* is a provocative mixture of period drama, sci-fi speculation, and feminism. Brougher describes it as “a playful movie that’s trying to get people to use their imaginations.”

Sticky achieved a cult following and was praised for its inventiveness, but Brougher felt she could do a better job of writing complex characters. “*Sticky* was more about plot twists,” she says. “After that, I wanted to do something more naturalistic, to challenge myself. I thought that I really needed to learn how to work with actors and to tell human stories in the moment.”

With *Stephanie Daley*, she says, “I wanted to do a story about a person who was living one life on the outside, and another life on the inside. A concealed pregnancy seemed to me to be the ultimate secret—especially for an adolescent.”

JIM GAFFIGAN, AMBER TAMBLYN, AND MELISSA LEO IN A STILL FROM HILARY BROUGHER'S *STEPHANIE DALEY*.

Safe Haven

As Brougher began to do research, she found many cases of teens who'd concealed pregnancies and been accused of killing or abandoning their babies. One of the most tragic is New Jersey's Melissa Drexler, who was sentenced to 15 years in prison in 1998 for disposing of her baby in a bathroom at her high school prom. More recently, teenage girls in Colorado and Maryland have been tried for murdering babies after concealed pregnancies. "These cases continue to happen, and a lot of them don't make the headlines," Brougher says. "You can't put it down to race or economics, because it crosses all those lines."

Although recent changes in legislation have tried to address the problem—since 1999, many states have enacted "safe haven" laws, allowing parents to abandon a baby at a hospital, police station, or firehouse without any legal consequences—Brougher says they might not be getting to the root causes. New York passed a safe-haven law in 2001, but, despite this apparent advance, babies continue to be killed after concealed pregnancies. "In a lot of cases I read about, girls would go into these states of shock and dissociation," says Brougher. "They can't even admit to themselves that they're pregnant. A heater doesn't do a freezing person any good unless they can admit they're cold and turn it on."

In the movie, Stephanie is a shy, church-going, middle-class teen. How much she's aware of what's happening in her body, and when, is left open to question. "These girls are sort of in dialogue with the universe," says Brougher. "They're in flux as to whether they think they're pregnant or not. And I got really interested in [asking]: How do we talk ourselves into something? Or out of something? There's a lot of superstitious thinking around it."

Tamblyn, who had her own anxieties during filming (between takes, she was on the phone, navigating a bitter breakup), says she understood Stephanie's struggle. "Lots of personal tribulations happened for me while I was preparing for the role," she recalls. "Plus, [there was] the lonely, very isolated environment where we shot the film, paired with an immense need to birth someone like Stephanie into the world."

Beeper Babies

The film traverses some dark territory, but it isn't all gloom and doom. Brougher has lightened the mood with humorous touches, like the sex education class where Stephanie and her classmates are given "beeper babies" and "beeper eggs" designed to teach them the responsibilities of parenting. The babies and eggs go off at inopportune times, creating absurd moments of tension. "Okay,

whoever has a baby or an egg, do what you need to do, but just make them *be quiet*," says an exasperated English teacher in one scene.

In fact, Brougher says, the set was surprisingly lighthearted and fun. "Tilda and Amber are extremely positive people," she explains. "They're also very funny, and I think that serves material that can go a little dark, because it doesn't get so dark that the characters just start melting into dysfunctionality."

For Brougher, it was a particularly happy consequence that the script took years to hone and produce. In the process, she gave birth to her twins, who she credits with making the movie happen. "I link this script to my twins," she says. "I feel as though their birth helped me get the movie made; they made me the person who was ready to direct it. To direct it from a place where I'd had my own happy ending, with these two great kids, was a blessing."

With *Stephanie Daley*, Brougher has proved that she has the chops to direct a delicate psychological drama. But, typically, she's ready for another, completely different challenge. "One of my current projects is a script I'm writing that's a contemporary retelling of Robin Hood," she says. "It's a sort of coming-of-age story that also involves Arthurian gymnastics." She pauses for a moment, then deadpans, "It's very different."

Next up, though, she'll be directing a screenplay adapted by her friend Keith Reamer (*Stephanie Daley*'s editor) from a novel by Scots writer Margot Livesey. Set around World War I, *Eva Moves the Furniture* is "a story about a young girl who's raised knowing two ghosts who are constantly in her life. It's very beautiful; it really talks about our connection to our ancestors."

Perhaps, I suggest, the common thread in her movies is that there's always some sort of barrier to connection between characters, whether it's death, time travel, or pathological denial. "Well, yes, that's basically me—struggling to connect across barriers," Brougher says with a sigh. Then again, I point out, her vision is essentially optimistic: Barriers that seem insurmountable at the outset of her movies are broken down, slowly but surely. She tilts her head, considering this. "It's true," she says. "The films I love are the ones that provide a safe place to feel the dark stuff, and then help us let it go. So that we can focus on life, and growth." She pauses a moment, and adds, "Filmmaking and mothering—they seem like similar animals to me." ☺

Stephanie Daley will be screened at Upstate Films in Rhinebeck May 11 to 18. Hilary Brougher will appear for a question-and answer-session following the May 11 screening. www.upstatefilms.org.