



An Interview with Emily Gerson Saines

An executive producer of the HBO Films presentation, *TEMPLE GRANDIN*

Claire Danes stars in the title role of the HBO Films' release, *TEMPLE GRANDIN*, based upon the books *Emergence*, by Temple Grandin and Margaret Scariano, and *Thinking in Pictures*, by Temple Grandin, whose autism has afforded her uncanny powers of observation.

Catherine O'Hara co-stars with Julia Ormond and David Strathairn. Mike Jackson directs from a screenplay by Christopher Monger and William Merritt Johnson. Executive producers: Emily Gerson Saines, Gil Bellows, Anthony Edwards, Dante De Loreto, Paul Lister, Alison Owen. Scott Ferguson produces.

The film debuted on HBO February 6th.



What inspired/motivated you to do this movie?

When my son Dashiell was first diagnosed in 1996, I felt very isolated from the world. At that time, the incidence rate of autism was only 1 in 10,000. A home computer and the internet were a relatively new phenomenon. There was virtually no autism community and it was so very hard to find support of any kind. Given the lack of awareness, people didn't know how to respond to me, and they certainly didn't know how to respond to him. I did my best to put on a happy face at work, but as a mother I felt hopeless. My son was out of control and each day he slipped further and further into his own world. It was not a happy time in my life.

One day my mother called. She had been at Barnes and Noble and saw a book entitled *Thinking in Pictures* by a woman with autism named Temple Grandin. Not long after that, my grandmother called to say she had read an article by Oliver Sacks about Temple Grandin. At the time when my energy, motivation, and spirit were at an all time low, they sent me the materials and then pestered me every day until I read them. I couldn't believe what I was reading. Temple's story brought me hope and Eustacia's story (Temple's mother) gave me direction and purpose. Parents of children with autism everywhere need to hear it, functionally and spiritually. I knew this story had to be told and I jumped at the chance.

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Why did you select this particular segment of Temple’s life?

What is extraordinary about Temple is not only what she achieved, but *how* she achieved it. As a woman, she broke into the male dominated livestock industry, in part because her autism left her with the inability to decipher the social and behavioral clues of others. Her autism also caused her mind to read and interpret the world in unusual ways. She had a unique vision, a desire and the will to see her vision implemented, and she didn’t really have the facilities to care what a bunch of sexist cowboys had to say about it. It’s a compelling story.

How involved were you with autism prior to this project?

In addition to the personal experience of dealing with autism 24/7 without vacation or pay for 16 years, I also became active in the greater autism community. In 1997 I co-founded the Autism Coalition, an organization that united many of the top autism organizations. It was the first organization to join forces with Bob and Suzanne Wright when Autism Speaks was being formed.

What message(s) does the film impart to the viewer?

There are so many: to have hope and not shy away from those qualities that make us unique; to realize that the very same things that can break your heart can also fill your heart and even make you laugh. It was always my intention to leave the audience with a greater sense of tolerance and appreciation of people who have special needs, particularly those with autism. Thanks to



Photos courtesy of HBO

the combined efforts and artistry of Claire Danes, our amazing cast, and our visionary director Mick Jackson, I believe our film sneaks up on you. At its core, the film is a triumph of the human spirit story, but it's told in an unusual yet relatable way.

What was the most challenging part of making the movie?

I think it was telling the story while being true to the autism experience. I felt I owed it to the autism community not to sugar-coat this story and tie it up neatly with a bow. The character of Temple Grandin starts this film autistic and ends this film autistic. As a parent, I wanted to impart the challenges and the sacrifice required to help our children become the best version of themselves they can be.

What is your favorite part of the film?

Actually there are three and they are all very personal to my experience. No matter how many times I watch this movie I cry at the graduation scene. In life, I cry with pride when my son spells a word correctly. I can't imagine the pride I would feel if he ever graduated from college. I love the scene when Temple drives up to the meat packing plant with her press credentials. The determination on her face and her smile are priceless. And I love the scene when her boss tells her to use deodorant. These

are very humanizing moments that make me laugh and cry from a deep place of understanding and acknowledgement.

Claire Danes was brilliant in her role as Temple Grandin. What made you select her over other actors for the part?

We closely examined every candidate and a few had different qualities that made them more or less right for the role. None of us had ever witnessed a false performance by Claire Danes, but she was not the obvious choice; she's petite and gorgeous. Ultimately we all felt talent should prevail. As excited as we all were when she said yes, she superseded our wildest expectations. It is one of the finest performances I have seen in my 20-year career in the entertainment business.

Claire acquired an uncanny likeness to Temple in mannerisms, voice tone and inflection. How, and how long, did she prepare for her role?

It's not how long Claire prepared, it's how diligently and methodically she prepared. Though the film was 10 years in the making, it was only a matter of months between Claire's acceptance of the role and HBO's green light on the project. When Claire accepted our offer she was vacationing in London. Her manager telephoned me asking if I could introduce her to a mother with a spectrum child in London right away and get her as much literature, DVDs, and tapes as I could. Upon her return, I introduced her to Temple. She then worked diligently on movement, dialect, and whatever else she does in her process to make her the incredible actress she is. The end result was just mesmerizing.

What effect do you think this movie will have on the general public's understanding of autism?

I hope it increases awareness of the challenges faced by people with autism and their families. I believe historically many of our great thinkers were on the autism spectrum, and going forward I believe we should support great minds, even if they behave in their own unique ways. Conversely, sadly, I believe there are many people with autism who are not functional at all, some of whom tantrum on a regular basis and can be self-injurious. It breaks my heart when my son hits himself until he is black and blue. The autism spectrum is just so wide from end to end. I believe we need to gain a better understanding of autism, continue a dialogue, and support people on the spectrum according to their varying needs. ■

Find a link to the movie trailer at the AADigest website home page.



The DVD release for TEMPLE GRANDIN is currently slated for fall 2010. HBO continues to air the movie throughout March; check local listings for times.