

# GIFT

A Michael Curtis Film

2.35:1, 17 minutes, 5.1 Surround Mix



Press Contact:  
Michael Curtis  
Filmstigator, LLC  
349 Lair Road NE  
Milledgeville, GA 31061  
(404) 220-8950  
mc@filmstigator.org

## **LOGLINE**

A young girl struggles with a boy's darkest demons as she struggles to free him from his troubled past.

## **SYNOPSIS**

Zoe, a young girl, discovers an abandoned shed in the woods near her home. She hears typing sounds coming from the shed and decides to explore. When she peers inside, she finds Aaron—a disturbed young boy close to her in age.

Aaron spends most of his time alone, typing stories he doesn't want anyone to see on an ancient typewriter. Dark visions torment him as he writes. Zoe is fascinated and troubled by his fear and isolation.

She visits the boy repeatedly as she tries to win his trust. But when she gets too close, Aaron lashes out. He begins to hear voices and fears he's losing his hold on reality.

Zoe tries to reach him in spite of his increasingly violent outbursts. The children sit before the typewriter as Aaron begins to type. His visions are dark and threatening. But Zoe has very different visions of her own while Aaron types.

Can she find a way to connect her visions with Aaron's? And what will happen to them both if she succeeds?

## CREATIVE TEAM BIOGRAPHIES

### **Michael Curtis** - (Co-Writer/Director/Producer/Editor)

Michael Curtis began his career as a motion picture and television editor, cutting films and broadcast promos for clients ranging from independent directors to major networks like PBS, ABC, TNT, Boomerang, Cartoon Network, and others. In the late 1990s he started EditLab, a production & post house based in Atlanta. Curtis originally trained as an actor and director in live theatre at the University of Alaska Anchorage. Now working exclusively behind the camera, his early experience working with stage actors remains a key component of his film directing approach.

In addition to directing, Curtis has served as a writer, editor, and producer for scores of film, television, and corporate spots. He has been awarded more than 100 creative awards over the last decade alone--including Finalist Awards in both Directing and Editing at the New York Film & Television Festival.

In 2013 Michael launched Filmstigator, the Georgia Film Collaborative--a non-profit arts collaborative that brings writers, actors, and filmmakers together to craft high-quality films in the southeast. "GIFT," Curtis's directorial film debut, is the first Filmstigator production as well.

Michael lives on a lake near Atlanta with his wife, Susan.

### **Alex Whitmer** – (Co-Writer)

Eleven years ago Alex decided to give screenwriting a shot. It seemed like a natural metamorphosis from fiction and poetry, while keeping the best of both: writing visually and embracing brevity. His biggest challenge was 'de-novelizing' the writing style. To date, Alex has written over 300 short and feature screenplays, and has had over 50 short films and 3 feature films produced. There are also a number of short and feature films currently in production, pre-production and/or development.

Over these eleven years, Alex has had the pleasure and gratitude to write for filmmakers all over the world, from Nepal, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Singapore, India, South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong and China, to Latvia, Lithuania, Canada, United States, Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland, Australia, Finland, Sweden and Norway, Germany, Austria, France, Romania, Nigeria, and Israel, the Republic of Mauritius, the Republic of Georgia, and Brazil. In addition to writing

cross-cultural films, Alex also writes strong roles for children, with an emphasis on exploring the darker sides of childhood, and strong lead and supporting roles for women, with an emphasis on the dichotomies of being fem.

Writing 'GIFT' (originally titled 'Middlebury Tales') was an emotional challenge because it explored personal issues in Alex's childhood. Indeed, the passion and epiphany of writing were discovered while pounding the keys of an old typewriter in a secluded 'sanctuary'. 'GIFT' revisits some of those memories.

### **Tom Pritchard** – (Director of Photography)

Tom has been invading people's personal bubbles with his camera ever since he graduated from the college of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Georgia in 2001. He enjoys every artistic aspect of the role of Director of Photography from the lighting, composition, story telling, and collaboration with the director and other production department heads. One could describe his attitude on set as steady, hard working and open to new ideas. Few things intrigue Tom more than the fusion of ideas between the Director and the DP. Similar to how no two people are the same, no two directing styles are the same, and Tom is happy to assert his talent in an appropriate and communal way as the production charges forward.

Making a movie is a pretty cool privilege, and the journey is every bit as important as the finished product. Because of this, Tom is committed to leading a camera and lighting department that everyone can be proud of.

### **Ben Goldberg** – (Composer)

Ben Goldberg studied composition at Berklee College of Music, where he graduated magna cum laude with a Bachelor of Music degree in film scoring. He has received awards for his concert music, film music, and academic achievements. His film music credits include four feature film scores in addition to numerous short films. His score for *Broadway's Finest* earned him best original score honors at the 2012 Long Island Film Expo. The score also received a best score nomination at Vision Fest 12, held at Tribeca Cinemas in New York. The documentary *Souled Out Comedy* premiered at the first annual Friars Club Film Festival in New York and won the audience choice award. The short film *American Identity* had its world premiere at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival's Short Film Corner where the film took home two awards. The feature film *Crutch* debuted theatrically at the Quad Cinema in New York City. *The Quality of Mercy*, starring Mary Louise Parker, aired regularly on HBO for two years.

Ben's music has also been heard on Animal Planet, CBS, FOX, NBC, The History Channel, children's DVDs, podcasts, video game apps, and a host of national television commercials. Please visit [www.bengoldbergmusic.com](http://www.bengoldbergmusic.com) where you can find samples of Ben's work, credits, full bio, and news.

## CAST BIOGRAPHIES

### **Katherine Shepler - (Zoe)**

Katherine Shepler has been actively engaged in the performing arts since age six, when she began training at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta. Since then, Katherine has been privileged to contribute principal roles in six films, including Hallmark Hall of Fame's "Front of the Class", Tyler Perry's "Single Mom's Club" and, most recently, Michael Curtis' "Gift". From a young age, Katherine has been able to comprehend the "bigger picture" with discernment beyond her years, and is drawn to roles with depth and purpose.

In addition to feature films, Katherine has contributed her voice over talents to various Disney projects and the newly animated Care Bears series. She has also enjoyed the opportunity to participate in nearly 2 dozen commercials and print projects over the past five years. Katherine's talents and interests beyond acting include all forms of dance, cheerleading, shopping with friends and, more recently, she has discovered a passion for the acoustic guitar and songwriting.

At age twelve, Katherine feels blessed to have experienced such a wide range of opportunities to apply her creative gifts and looks forward with excitement to the bright future ahead.

### **Royce Mann – (Aaron)**

Royce made his professional stage debut at age 7 as Tiny Tim in 'A Christmas Carol' at the Alliance Theater. He has been working non-stop ever since in principal roles in films/TV/commercials and other professional stage productions. Royce was named Best Actor for the Indie Short 'Boy in the Box' at age 9 out of over 50 teams in the 48 Hour Film Project. He originated the principal youth role of Young Joe in the World Premiere of 'Ghost Brothers of Darkland County' in which he worked with Stephen King, John Mellencamp, T Bone Burnett, and Director Susan Booth.

Royce plays son to Gina Gershon in the 2014 feature film 'The Lookalike.' Royce is shooting his own films via RoyceSolo Productions and Producing via Punch Brothers Prods. A short he stars in, 'Goodman's Salute,' is on the 2014 Festival Circuit. He has been busy writing his first play and his first screenplay, which he plans to produce and direct.

Royce enjoys sports, photography, art, chess, dancing, and traveling. He was honored as a 2014 Young Artist of the Year Nominee by the GA Entertainment Gala.

## **Official Film Festival Selections**

Isle of Wight Film Festival (August 12 – 18, 2014)  
FirstGlance Film Festival (October 17 – 19, 2014)  
Santa Monica Indie Film Festival (October 3 – 5, 2014)  
Orlando Film Festival (October 22 – 26, 2014)  
Savannah Film Festival (October 25 – November 1, 2014)  
Napa Valley Film Festival (November 12 – 16, 2014)  
Festival de Cannes 2015 – Court Métrage (May 2015)

## **Awards**

2014 CINE Golden Eagle – Independent Short Film  
2014 Best Shorts Competition – Award of Excellence – Short Film  
2014 Accolade Awards – Award of Excellence – Short Film  
2014 Accolade Awards – Award of Excellence – Directing  
2014 Best Shorts Competition – Award of Excellence – Trailer

## Director's Statement

'GIFT' is a special project for me – and not just because it's the first narrative film I've directed and produced. The project feels noteworthy because of how the film came into being... crafted by a team of people who chose to trust in a newly-formed (and woefully under-funded) film collaborative called Filmstigator.

'GIFT' tells the story of Aaron, a troubled boy who has lost his way in many respects. He's someone who needs some help setting things right. I imagine lots of us have felt 'stuck' in areas of our lives at one time or another. Maybe that's the aspect of his personality I related to most. Will Zoe be able to help him? Can she even find a way to reach him? I wanted to find out.

Getting 'unstuck' creatively was one of the main reasons I chose to launch Filmstigator. After years of working as a television editor and producer, I yearned to branch out and start creating the kinds of personal films I'd never had a chance to make before. The kinds of films that had drawn me to the industry in the first place—but that time, lack of funding, the demands of making a living, and my own lame excuses had kept me from doing. I wondered if there were others out there like me, and I began actively looking for them.

I found a screenwriter who specializes in writing short films—an American who teaches English & runs a bakery in Mexico. His final draft became our starting point, and together we collaborated on a whole new ending for the film full of symbolism and myth. My 1st AD and script supervisor was a friend who'd never performed either role before—much less both of them at once. I had a great camera team, but most people working on our set were not that experienced. But we all believed in the project and in the process. And that was the point.

I guess I'm more comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity than black and white answers. I prefer the questions, the mysteries. We all have things that frighten us, things we need to own up to and confront—both in ourselves and in others. We all have times we need to take chances and risk trusting another person.

For me, 'GIFT' is about many things. Rather than trying to explain too many things about the film, I prefer the audience to experience the film and make their own conclusions. I hope people enjoy it and get something out of seeing it, but the film stands best on its own.

Maybe we all find the answers that best suit us as we look closely, listen carefully, and break through the obstacles that prevent us from being truly free. I think the stories we tell ourselves have tremendous power. They shape how we view the world around us and how we interact with that world. They make us who we are.



## Q & A with Director Michael Curtis

*Q: Can you talk about some of the themes present in “GIFT?”*

**MC:** Oh, boy. I can see I’m going to get in trouble right from start, because I really try not to talk about themes very much. I’d prefer audiences to take whatever they can from the project, and leave the rest alone. I come from a live theatre background, and in that world once the play is in front of an audience, it doesn’t really belong to the director anymore. The audience and the actors “make” the production anew each performance.

There were some universal ideas that I discussed with the actors and crew during rehearsals and at the start of production—big broad things like the power of stories and the imagination, and certainly the power patience and compassion. There are many other things in the film, too, I think, but I’d really like to leave those for viewers to consider.

*Q: There’s not a lot of dialogue in the film. Why did you take that approach and what are the challenges?*

**MC:** Right. There’s not a lot of spoken dialogue, but there’s a lot going on between the words. It puts a lot of pressure on the actors to bring all the nuances of the performance into light when there are lots of spaces in the scenes without talking. I find that actors enjoy these challenges. Working with children performers, you need to find ways to bring the moment-to-moment reality alive for them, so that they understand what the character is feeling, thinking, doing in each moment of the story even when they’re not speaking. A lot of short films are very talky, trying to be clever with dialogue, and robbing the viewer in a lot of cases of the power that visual storytelling can bring. I wanted to leave space for the actors to create the characters beyond the words, and use visual storytelling to create the world and themes of the film.

*Q: Your two lead actors were both children. How do you work with child actors—especially when they haven’t experienced mental illness or disabilities?*

**MC:** You do the best you can to help the actor imagine what those experiences are like. A lot of child performers have trained in their craft enough to be able to believe in a set of circumstances. They’ve been exposed to basic Stanislavski techniques like the “magic if” and so on. On a large budget film you can search and search and audition thousands of performers for the right one, but on an indie, self-funded short like “GIFT,” I knew I would probably need to spend a lot of time in rehearsal working through subtext and what was really going on in each scene. We didn’t just have the kids show up on set and start rolling cameras. I

spent about a month rehearsing with the actors a few times a week. I wish we'd had more time available for rehearsal, but our budget made that impossible.

*Q: Were there any films or specific directors that influenced "GIFT?"*

**MC:** I don't really know. I'm a big fan of Terrence Malick and Wes Anderson. Vastly different filmmakers, and I'm not sure if they influenced anything in this film or not. It's hard to say. We're all shaped by our experiences and the art we've taken in. That's one of the reasons I love visiting art museums and galleries. I suppose you can see some of Malick's love of the natural world in a few scenes in "GIFT." But those shots really come from a talk I had with Alex about the character—which is loosely based on his own experience growing up. There really was a troubled boy with a typewriter in an old shed. I felt we needed to get a glimpse of the boy's world beyond his time with the typewriter, and Alex often escaped into the natural world as a child. I wrote those things into the script as an interplay between the two children—each exploring new landscapes. So I don't think there were any overt influences on me with this project. But subconsciously, who knows?

*Q: How did the script of "GIFT" evolve over time?*

**MC:** Alex Whitmer sent me his original draft, and I thought it had some potential. I liked some aspects of the story and I liked the two main character. His original version of this story was called "Middlebury Tales." It was a very personal story for him. He kind of was the boy in the shed when he was growing up. For that reason, I did the rewrites myself, because I saw the potential in the story if we could change the ending, and I felt like my distance from the story might be helpful. The original story had ending scenes that I didn't care for and that I felt were keeping the story from working to its full potential. So over several weeks, I rewrote the entire back half of the script, cut a scene entirely, and added the mythical elements and locations you now see in the film. And Alex has been very open and gracious about how the story morphed and how the movie turned out. He seems very happy with the results.

*Q: What was it about the original draft that spoke to you and made you want to make the film?*

**MC:** It probably wasn't just one thing. It's hard to say because the original draft is fairly different than the film. I think Alex has the original draft on his web site. I think I liked the two lead characters, and I loved the idea of a young boy processing his world through writing—even though that writing was "non-traditional," let us say. And I saw the potential to take that story to a different

level and to explore layers of meaning. Ultimately I thought there could be a lot of richness in the tale. And beauty.

**Q:** *“GIFT” seems to be a study in contrasts: Aaron/Zoe, sick/well, weak/strong, isolated/outgoing, dark/light, etc. How did you emphasize these contrasts while making the movie?*

**MC:** Just as you say. By helping the actors and crew understand those nuances at the beginning of the project and holding true to that vision throughout.

## CAST

Zoe	Katherine Shepler
Aaron	Royce Mann
Mom	Meilssa Etheridge
Audrey	Raymie Lewis

Directed and Produced by  
Michael Curtis

Written by  
Alex Whitmer  
Michael Curtis

Director of Photography  
Tom Pritchard

Music Composer  
Ben Goldberg

Edited by  
Michael Curtis

Wardrobe Designer  
Jennifer Denise Bennett

Casting  
Brian Beegle  
Stilwell Casting

1st Assistant Director / Script Supervisor  
Melissa Bowers

Jekyll Island DP / 1st Camera Assistant  
Chance White

2nd Camera Assistant  
David Ross

Gaffer  
Paul Hurley

Key Grip  
Todd Harvey

Grip  
Johnny Stubbs

Sound Recordist  
Tom Boisseau

Boom Operators  
Ken Kistner  
Joey Davidson

Makeup Artists  
TaraLynn Overby  
Cynthia Webster

Shed Set Construction  
Harold Gilder  
Mike Wilson

Production Assistants  
Josh Deisler  
David Crigler

Sound Design  
Aaron Bowdoin  
Brian Kahane

Re-recording Mixer  
Brian Kahane

Strings Produced by  
Christian Howes String Recording

Violin  
Christian Howes

Cello  
Yoed Nir

Still Photography  
Tendall Mann

Locations / Permits / Props  
Michael Curtis

Composer  
Keith Adams  
SpinVFX

Colorist  
Dave Pickett

Publicity  
Filmstigator

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