



Erin Trahan

THE JEW
IN THE LOTUS



CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH LAUREL CHITEN

One snowy Boston evening changed the course of things for director Laurel Chiten. "I feel like John Mack abducted me," she laughs.

"I don't know what was going on that night, I was being so goofy, making everyone laugh." The snow prevented the film's main character from introducing her film, *THE JEW IN THE LOTUS*. So she arrived at the MFA, an impromptu comedienne, to take his place. It was her sense of humor and her edge that prompted John Mack to seek her out after the film. "I didn't even know who he was. He wanted me to make a film about alien abductions."

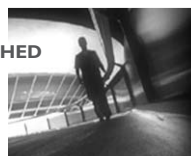
So who is John Mack? Though a professor of psychiatry at Harvard and a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer, his celebrity is arguably more attached to his research on alien encounters than more "suitable" subjects for a person of his ilk. Since publishing the best selling book *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* in 1997 (and outing him as a presumed extraterrestrial "believer" on shows like *OPRAH* and the *TODAY SHOW*), Mack grew frustrated, even bored by the predictable questioning of whether accounts of abductions were

true or false. His next book on the subject, *Passport to the Cosmos*, is meant to move beyond the question of "if" and to a question that he believes is more relevant to earthly life "what do alien abductions mean for us?"

Chiten's immediate reaction to exploring the topic of alien abduction was to push the project away. "I knew absolutely nothing about the subject, and more importantly, I didn't care about it." Her other films like *TWITCH AND SHOUT* and *THE JEW IN THE LOTUS* were personal to her. When she finally started sifting through the first-person accounts of missing time, bodily probing, sperm extraction, impregnation, and apocalyptic warnings, Chiten reacted like most first-time abductees: she was frightened. She acknowledges that the topic called up her deepest fears, fears she cannot necessarily name. "I was emphatic about not making this film," she reiterates.

But Mack's persistence led to an encounter at the Harvard faculty club, where Chiten first heard "experiencers" (as they call themselves) speak. She was struck by how sane the speakers appeared. "One woman reached out her hand to describe how it

TOUCHED



TWITCH
AND
SHOUT



DIRECTOR
LAUREL CHITEN

felt to be touched by an alien . . . and she started to cry. Forget aliens, it was so human to me, this longing to connect." It is the translation of ostensibly inhuman experiences into unavoidably human terms that Chiten explores in *TOUCHED*.

TOUCHED is Chiten's third documentary; she is both director and producer. For someone who never set out to be a director, she's developed an impressive niche — a five-episode dramatic satirical series, which has since developed a cult following. She later directed a ten-part video series based on Robin Casarjian's book, *House of Healing*. Would-be-directors may not want to hear Chiten's thoughts about joining her ranks. "Don't become a filmmaker unless you have to. It is extremely hard work." And has she made money from her films? Not really. Yet every time she engages a new subject, she falls in love, only to revisit the stress and anxiety of wondering if the film will ever be seen or appreciated once completed. Since she is just wrapping production on *TOUCHED*, in preparation for its February 20 debut at the MFA, she admits to being stretched a little thin.

Fortunately, she surrounded herself with a great crew: "I attract people who are much smarter than I am, they make me look really good." Perhaps too modest, Chiten has had colleagues claim that it is her credibility as a filmmaker that will get them through the door of seeing her latest, potentially most controversial film.

TOUCHED has been unique for Chiten because of her collaboration with editor Sabrina Zanella-Foresi and DP Andy Abrahams Wilson, who also serve as co producers. Zanella-Foresi's role expanded through the course of production and Chiten is thrilled with the results. Even with their camaraderie, the crew approached the subject matter with differing philosophies. "Let's just say I was Scully and Andy was Mulder. We actually called each other that," shares Chiten. Apparently "Mulder" was eager to experience his own UFO ride.

One unexpected (and still highly confidential) occurrence dramatically affected the film at its zero hour. Let's just say something happened to a character that in Chiten's words "had a ripple effect on the entire film." She promises the newly integrated material makes for an even more intense ending.

Chiten wishes the film could tour the world, with she and Mack answering Q and A. Not that the film is about answers. But it opens up questions about the reorganization and reevaluation of strongly held beliefs about the cosmos, the divine, and the ever-pressing need for human connection. Chiten calls *TOUCHED* a "launch pad" for discussing the phenomenon of alien life and its consequences on humans, experiencers or not: "It talks about people who have contact with these beings, whoever and whatever, they are. Its source remains a mystery and the implications of this phenomenon are still unknown."

Chiten's next projects are in various stages of production. She is working on "Freedoms Behind Bars", in collaboration with The Lionheart Foundation, about a ten-day meditation retreat inside a maximum-security prison in Alabama as well as "Twisted" about a neurological disorder even more unknown than Tourette's Syndrome. Chiten describes, "like a *TWITCH AND SHOUT* two." Both of these have footage shot and she is looking for funding.

Chiten chalks up her chance meeting with Mack as serendipitous. But when asked about how she chooses her next film project she says, "Most of the time I don't pick a project, they pick me." Maybe *TOUCHED* will explain exactly who "they" are. Or maybe it's more exhilarating not to know.

TOUCHED premieres at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston on February 20th at 8 pm. Both Laurel Chiten and John E. Mack will be present. And will screen again on March 9 at 12:20 pm, Friday, April 11, at 8 pm with John Mack present, and Wednesday, April 16, at 6 pm. For more information about *TOUCHED* or Laurel Chiten, visit www.blinddogfilms.com.



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