

PROXY

a development prospectus for a feature film

DIRECTOR&WRITER / Eric Schuman

PRODUCER/ Birgit Gernoböck

CO-PRODUCER/ Andrew K. Li

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THE STORY

A chubby, barely fourteen-year old boy named Russ sits in a lawn chair in front of a motel. He lives there with his dad, works there too. Cars whip past on the highway in front of him. He's waiting to start work.

Even though he is caring, he's just a bit too sincere and wide-eyed to understand how to interact with other kids. He lives with his dull father, Arthur. His mother left them when he was seven, and he really isn't sure why. He hasn't seen her since. Sometimes, he wonders where she is and if she thinks about him, but he tries to keep those kinds of thoughts at bay. They're sad, and he doesn't want to be sad. The only person he really talks to is his kind Aunt Judy. She puts up with him and his bad jokes, ones he takes from a joke book a guest left behind.

His father? He's too busy with his own life to make time for him. His father has to clean a room, deal with a bad check, sit on the couch decompressing and watching the Pirates. But Russ is not mad. Russ is not angry. Unknowingly, he's crafted a routine and called it a life: working with his father, talking with his Aunt, watching *The Simpsons*, smashing fluorescent light bulbs against walls for fun, itching the skin right above ankles until it's raw and bleeding.

Russ glances around, checking to see if anyone's around. Sure he's alone, he starts to give himself a hickey on his arm.

A couple of towns over, a stringent woman quizzes her daughter in a doctor's office, asking the girl what she's going to say when the doctor comes in. Will she say she's been coughing? Yes, the girl says. Will she say she's been dizzy? Yes, the girl says. The girl is teenaged, sickly, and bald. Her name is Bev. Her mother's name is Mona. She answers her mom quietly, only looking up to say "Yes" and then looking back down. She sits atop a small examination table. Parchment paper covers its blue vinyl top. As her mom speaks, she absentmindedly pulls at the paper, tearing it.

LOGLINE

Russ, a lonely boy, lives and works at a motel with his father. When a sick girl, Bev, and her mother come to the motel, Russ secretly befriends her. Through their fragile relationship, Russ discovers the girl's mother is making her sick. Trying to save her, Russ wreaks havoc on both their lives.



SCRIPT AWARDS

The feature script for Proxy was chosen for Faculty Selects by the Columbia University Film Festival, marking it by the faculty as one of the best student scripts of the year. It got the Zaki Gordon Memorial Award for Excellence in Screenwriting there.



School is distant dream for Bev. She and her mom have spent the last three years traveling from doctor to doctor, hospital to hospital, trying to find out what's wrong with her. Bev has become an expert at swallowing pills dry. No longer does she flinch at late-night injections from her mother. Her life has been consumed by the fluorescent glow of hospital hallway lights, the artificial stench of latex gloves that lingers on her skin long after examinations, the bruises on her arms from the insertions of needles.

Her only friend, her only life-line to a world that isn't inside her own head, is her mother. Her kind mother. Her cruel mother. Her controlling mother. It all depends on what the doctors have been saying. If they've said Bev's doing well, then her mother is angry and callous. If the doctors believe Bev is ill, her mother is kind and caring and everything she could want. Once a lively and curious girl, Bev has become her mother's nervous dog.

Russ and Bev's lives are two sides of the same coin. Where Russ experiences a lack of attention from his father, Bev's mother gives too much. Both are isolated by the actions of their parents. Russ lacks connection to anyone in his world. Bev only has a relationship with her mother.

Soon Bev and Mona will come to stay at the motel Arthur runs, and Bev and Russ will meet. A secret, fragile friendship will form between these two nervous and lonely kids, and from it will bloom the first romantic relationship of their young lives. Hands will be held. First kisses will be had.

But underneath this Eden will be the dark truth of Mona and Bev's life, one that Russ will unwittingly discover, that the only thing making Bev sick is her mother. The injections? The pills? All unnecessary. All ways her mother has made Bev ill for attention (a psychological disorder known as Munchausen by Proxy).

The real world will infringe on their paradise when Russ figures out this secret. He will make up his mind to save his lone friend and first love, but will just end up wreaking havoc on both his and Bev's lives.

WHAT IS MUNCHAUSEN BY PROXY?

As Munchausen by Proxy features heavily in *Proxy*, here are a number of quotations from medical textbooks, memoirs, and essays regarding the syndrome.

If you are interested further, we recommend viewing the recent HBO documentary by Erin Lee Care, *Mommy Dead and Dearest*, or reading *Hurting for Love* by Dr. Judith A. Libow and Dr. Herbert A. Schreier.

"In Munchausen by Proxy (MBP), individuals create symptoms of illness not in themselves, but in dependent others who serves as 'proxies.' The majority of MBP perpetrators are women, most often mothers, who induce illness in their children or subject them to painful medical procedures in a quest for emotional satisfaction, such as attention from and control over others..."
from [Playing Sick?](#) by Marc D. Feldman, M.D.

"I envision myself growing paper thin. Mom lovingly takes care of me and does everything because I'm a frail but smiling child, riddled with cancer you can't see. I imagine my beautiful bald head, how cool my silk headscarf will look, knotted at the nape of my pale neck, trailing down my back. I am untouchable. No one ever makes fun of the cancer girl. And everybody is nice to her because they never know when she's going to die."
From [Sickened](#), a memoir by Julie Gregory

"My earliest memory of abuse is between the ages of 2 and 3. I was in the high chair with the tray pulled tightly to my chest. I could barely breathe, let alone move. My left leg was tied to the leg of the high chair with a dish towel. My hands were bound to prevent me from pulling at my mother's hair. She was very angry at me for fighting her. Her words were always the same and repeated frequently over the next several years: "I'm doing this for your own good. The doctor wants me to do this treatment to make you better." As the blows of the hammer were hitting my foot all I could understand was the pain. I tried hard to escape her grasp. This made her even more angry. 'If you don't hold still, it will take even longer.' I came to believe it was my fault she was angry. I was not a good girl. I needed to try harder to please her so she would love me."
From "My Mother Caused My Illness..." an article in *Pediatrics* by Mary Bryk



Image from a BuzzFeed article. This girl is being made sick by her own mother. She ended up killing her mother.



Lacey Spears ended up poisoning her own son to death with salt while trying to keep him sick.



Jennifer Bush, seen above at age 8, was forced to undergo 200 unnecessary hospitalizations by her own mother, Kathy Bush, who was later arrested and imprisoned.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

It all started because from kindergarten until fifth grade, I had a crush on a girl named Sophie.

We lived on the same street, had the same bus stop, went to Hebrew School together, had our first kiss together. Our parents were good friends. Besides her being a girl, the only difference between us was that she was bald, and I wasn't. I never really thought about it. To me, she was just the girl I liked, and she happened to wear a bandana on her head all the time. Usually, a paisley white one. I can still picture it. Later, I would learn she had alopecia, but at the time I thought she had cancer.

In third grade, the school bully, a tubby boy named Tim, came up to me in the hallway and said, "How's your bald girlfriend doing?" I had to defend her honor. I had to defend my honor. We met on the hill during recess. It was winter, and he was wearing a large blue coat. With all the wit I could muster, I called him a blueberry.

Once, I went onto Microsoft Word, and used Word Art. Over and over again I wrote "I Love Sophie" in different styles. I printed it out and walked to our bus stop. Sophie was already standing there, and I didn't give it to her.

My best friend back then - a lanky, blond boy named Colin - had a crush on her too. One time as I was rounding the school building during recess, I could see Sophie sitting on top of the jungle gym and started walking faster. As the full structure came into view, my eyes caught Colin next to her, their hands intertwined. I ran off crying.

At the time, each of these moments were the end of the world. It felt like this is how I die, scared of everything and with everyone laughing at me. To put it lightly, I was an overly sensitive child. Until the age of ten, I wore diapers when I slept. I cried often. The social anxieties I experienced then are at the center of Proxy.

So many films about kids are filled with irony and a sense of detachment. Kids talk like adults and seem to have minds full of witty retorts and obscure references. Everyone's happy, except that one sad kid in the corner. To me, childhood is both a wonderland for play and early romance and a mine-eld of social terror teeming with possibilities for embarrassment. It's full of bored times when you have to make your own fun and nervous moments when you're still figuring out how to interact with others.

With the film, I've tried to maintain an honest and sincere viewpoint while also delving into the darker realities of the world. While not all my films are about children or teens, all are sincere, have comic moments, and feature outsiders as protagonists.

To keep the film authentic, I spent a large amount of time doing research on Munchausen by Proxy. Most helpful were the books "Sickened" by Julie Gregory and "Hurting for Love: Munchausen by Proxy Syndrome" by Dr. Herbert A. Schreier and Judith A. Libow (along with countless articles from medical journals, many by Dr. Schreier).

THE SHORT FILM OF "PROXY"



Proxy began life as a short film I made while in Columbia University's MFA film program. Under the mentorship of Ramin Bahrani (*Chop Shop*, *99 Homes*), I studied directing, and this film was part of my thesis work.

It's gone on to play internationally at festivals, including the Dallas International Film Festival, the TIFF Kids International Film Festival, and the Palm Springs International ShortFest.

Below, you'll find a link to a trailer for the short film as well as a password protected link to the short film itself. Please keep the link to the short film private.

[TRAILER](#)
[SHORT FILM](#) (password: MSBP)



Stills from the short film of *Proxy*

OFFICIAL SELECTION

tiff

TIFF KIDS INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL 2017



CREW



ERIC SCHUMAN (WRITER/DIRECTOR) is a writer/director. He graduated with honors from Vassar College and Columbia University's MFA program. While there, he received the Emerging Filmmaker award for his upcoming short film, *Smother Me in Hugs*, and his feature screenplay, *Proxy*, was chosen for Faculty Selects, marking it as one of the best student scripts of the year by faculty. Additionally, it received the Zaki Gordon Memorial Award for Excellence in Screenwriting. Previously, he co-wrote the story and was the cinematographer of the upcoming feature film, *The Undiscovered Country*. His previous shorts have screened internationally - including at TIFF Kids. His short film, *Idiot, Me*, won a Cine Golden Eagle Award.



BIRGIT "BITZ" GERNBÖCK (PRODUCER) is a producer based in Frankfurt, Germany and New York City. Prior pursuing her MFA from Columbia University School of the Arts, she had already worked on more than 30 films and TV shows for German Television Broadcasting, allowing her to be well-versed in international film funds. Gernböck received two Katharina Otto Bernstein awards from Columbia, and co-produced the short *Sundae*, which premiered at the New York Film Festival. She also produced Francisca Alegria's *And The Whole Sky Fit in a Dead Cow's Eye*, which received a National Board of Review Award, premiered at TIFF, and screened at The New York Film Festival, Telluride, and Sundance where it received the International Jury Prize for Best Short. Most recently, Gernböck produced the feature film *Holy New York*, which is currently in post.



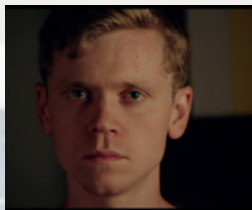
ANDREW K. LI (CO-PRODUCER) is a filmmaker based in New York and Hong Kong. He has produced narrative features and shorts that screened at international film festivals, including TIFF, SXSW, New Directors/New Films and Cannes Film Festival. His latest short, *Submarine*, which premiered at the 69th Cannes Film Festival in the Cinéfondation category, has won a number of awards and is currently shortlisted for a BAFTA nomination. His first feature film as producer, *Casual Encounters* (2013), was selected to participate in the IFP's Emerging Visions and premiered in New York. He also produced a TV movie, *5 States of Fear* (2014), which was backed by NBCUniversal and played on Chiller TV. Recently, he lead produced two feature films *Vera* and *The Undiscovered Country*, which are both currently in post-production. He is also in post-production for his directorial short, *The Two Ravens*. Li graduated with an MFA in Film from Columbia University.



ALAN SCOTT NEAL (CASTING DIRECTOR) is a native of Virginia. While completing an MFA in directing/screenwriting at Columbia University, he started working full-time with renowned casting director Avy Kaufman (*Lincoln*, *Life of Pi*, *Prometheus*). There he worked closely with acclaimed filmmakers Ang Lee, Steve Zaillian and Ira Sachs and on such projects as HBO's *The Night Of* and Netflix's *The OA*. Last year he edited the feature film *I'm Obsessed With You* starring Emmy-nominated actor Rachel Brosnahan (*House of Cards*, *Beautiful Creatures*) and Jason Ralph (*The Magicians*). A film festival hit, it was released by FilmBuff on various streaming platforms. Currently he is developing and producing the feature film *Jack On The Rocks* written by Pete Jones (screenwriter of the Farrelly brother's film *Hall Pass*).



TENEMENT (MUSIC) is a DIY punk band from Appleton, Wisconsin. *Rolling Stone* named them on the ten great modern punk band. Their two-disc album *Predatory Highlights* was named a top ten album by numerous publications and was written up by the *New York Times*, which wrote, "Amos Pitsch, Tenement's singer, guitarist and songwriter, has a hyper-sophisticated interest in the mechanics of music in general." They've been profiled by publications and online magazines such as *grantland* and *noisye*. Previously, they scored the short of film of *Proxy* and Eric Schuman's newest short, *Smother Me in Hugs*.



TIM O'CONNOR (ASSISTANT DIRECTOR) began his professional work in production on blockbuster films such as *Men in Black 3*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*. He has worked as 1st Assistant Director on over a dozen short films in the last five years. His writing/directing credits include the Reel 13 contest-winning short, *Jesus Talk*, which premiered on PBS. Tim is currently pursuing an MFA in Directing at Columbia University, and won the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Feature Treatment Competition for narrative films on scientific subjects. He recently completed production on his first feature film, *The Undiscovered Country*.

STYLE



stills from the short film of *Proxy*

Informed by the expressionistic realism of Lynn Ramsey (specifically, *Ratcatcher*), the lyricism of Terence Davies (specifically, *Long Day Closes*), the stark intensity of Vincent Gallo's *Buffalo '66*, and the brutal humanism of Raymond Carver's short stories, the directorial perspective of *Proxy* is heightened, subjective, and obsessive.



Ratcatcher



Buffalo '66



Long Day Closes

CAMERA

The camera in *Proxy* is expressive, always tied to either Russ or Bev. This expressionism can take the form of stillness or of movement. When the camera is still, the emotional inflection of the image comes through the composition: a single finger pulling at a thread, a wide shot of mostly-empty room with a boy sitting on a bed in the bottom of the frame. Movement of the camera comes through both zooms and dollies. Zooms will be saved for purely psychological moments. A boy sits at a dinner table, a secret brewing inside of him. The camera starts wide while everyone else chats and slowly zooms into him.

ACTORS

Drawing from the improvisational work of Robert Altman and John Cassavetes, the actors will have a strong level of freedom with the script on set and in rehearsals to imbue the film with more nuance and realism. The beats of the scene will be in place, but actors will have the ability to play with the actions and words. I've embraced this practice in all of my previous work, and I believe it engenders greater vibreny and verisimilitude. Further, it allows for humor to enter the picture.

TONE

While the story of *Proxy* is dark, the tone of the film is not. It's a drama infused with a comic spirit. Much of this comic tone comes from the character of Russ. He's a fish out of water, an innocent, naïve teen thrust into a dark world with blinders on. It's in the small moments of behavior. A boy witnesses a girl in pain, doesn't know what to do, and simply tries to give her a hug. To get a girl's attention in public, a boy tells her knock-knock jokes.

COLORS

The color pallete of *Buffalo '66* points the direction for *Proxy*. That movie was shot with a particular film process that created a muted look called bleach-bypass. For *Proxy*, we'll be shooting on digital and will form this look through a combination of color correction in post and on-set production design.

LINKS TO SCENES OF SIMILAR CAMERA WORK

[3 Women](#)

[Buffalo '66](#)

[Long Day Closes](#)

[La Cienaga](#)

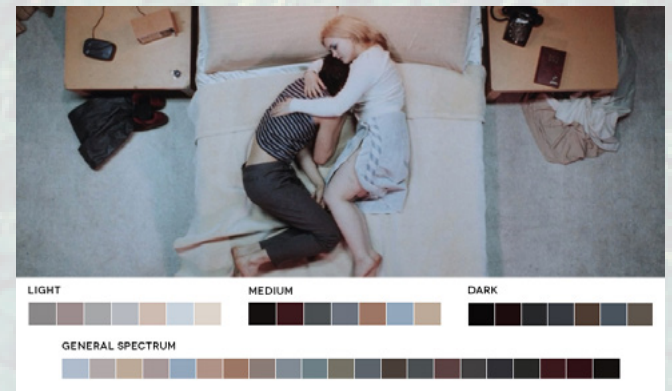
[Ratcatcher](#)



still from Robert Altman's *California Split*



still from Noah Baumbach's tragi-comedy *Squid and the Whale*



CHARACTERS



Thomas Robinson

RUSS

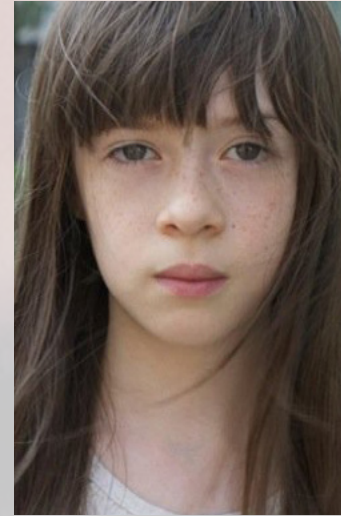
Nervous, anxious, and too curious for his own good, Russ has few friends, works all the time at the motel he lives at with his dad, and must find private ways to find his own fun. His mother left him and his father when he was seven, and he has not fully dealt with this loss.



Kathryn Hahn

MONA

Seemingly charming, seemingly loving, seemingly the perfect mother. Her Munchausen by Proxy comes from a fear of losing her daughter, and a desire to to get the attention of the world. No one usually looks at her. No one usually cares for her. But when she has a sick daughter, people fawn over her, call her a martyr. Why stop?



Onata Aprile

BEV

A fragile, broken child whose home has become the hospitals she frequents with her mother. Once a boisterous and funny girl, Bev has become a scared and se-crative child. Homeschooled, Bev hasn't spent much time with other kids. Her only friend is her mother.



Brett Gelman

ARTHUR

Arthur used to be a high-school athlete, one of the best in the state, but his girlfriend got pregnant, and they got married, and he started working at his wife's father's motel. When he died they took charge, but then his wife left. This isn't the life he imagined, but he'll work hard to make it through the day. He's tired all the time and pretty frustrated with his lot in life.

The actors pictured here are the types we would try and go after and are not attached to the project. Thomas Robinson was in *Tommorowland*; Onata Aprile was in *What Masie Knew*; Kathryn Hahn has been in *Parks and Recreation*, *Transparent*, and *Bad Moms*; Brett Gelman has been on *Love*, *Fleabag*, *High Maintanance*.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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LINKS

[Eric Schuman's Website](#)
[Proxy Website](#)
[Short film of Proxy](#) (password: MSBP)

RESEARCH MATERIALS

[Playing Sick?](#) by Marc D. Feldman, M.D.
[Munchausen](#), Dr. Marc D. Feldman's website
[Sickened](#) by Julie Gregory, a memoir of a Munchausen-by-Proxy childhood
[Hurting For Love](#) by Herbert A. Schreier MD and Judith A. Libow
["Dee Dee Wanted Her Daughter To Be Sick, Gypsy Wanted Her Mom To Be Murdered,"](#) BuzzFeed article about Munchausen by Proxy

For a full list of research materials pertaining to Munchausen by Proxy as well as a letter of support written by our medical advisor, Dr. Herbert A. Schreier, MD., contact Eric Schuman.