

Stuck In Mute - A Short Film

'A short film about a young woman who lives in a world of isolation. She struggles to find her way through a society that demands that she speaks.'

Stuck In Mute is a new short film featuring a character of a young woman called Robin who has selective mutism. The director, crew and cast have been finding out more about selective mutism as well as helping to raise awareness of the disorder. Read our interviews with the writer/director Shane Meuwissen and actress Katie Kleiger to find out more!

Could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

I'm a filmmaker based in Minneapolis. I attended film school at the Academy of Art in San Francisco. I've made several short films over the past few years and am currently working on writing a feature length film.

For those who aren't already aware, could you tell us about the film Stuck In Mute?

"Stuck In Mute" is a short film that follows a 20 year old woman with selective mutism. The film highlights the challenges and misconceptions that surround selective mutism. In this 12 minute film, we explore the world of someone with selective mutism, showing the ups and downs of daily life.

Where did the idea of having a character with selective mutism in your film develop from?

I was reflecting on the anxiety we all experience in certain social situations. I began to wonder what it would be like to live in a world where you couldn't talk to anyone and that's when I stumbled upon selective mutism. I had never heard of SM and I was surprised by the unawareness most people had about this condition. I decided that it was something I needed to explore as a writer and that's where it all began.

You've done a lot of research around SM for the film, has it changed your view on the disorder?

It certainly has changed my view. I initially believed many of the myths about SM; it's caused by trauma, it's just a form of "shyness", etc. I quickly realized that its origins and its physical manifestations were quite different than what I assumed.



Shane on set



The cast and crew on set

Kat Perkins has recently contributed her song Fearless to Stuck In Mute which you used when writing the script. Which other songs or artists inspire you?

I'm inspired by such a variety of music. As a filmmaker, it helps me to write my stories with specific types of music in mind, it helps me set the mood of for the scenes and the characters.

How did you first get into making short films?

I had an active imagination as a child, so taking those imaginary stories and portraying them on video was really just the next step. It wasn't until I went to film school that I began to understand all the amazing things you can do to create interesting stories in film. And over the past few years, I've read so many scripts and books on screenwriting, it's helped me to understand the intricacies of storytelling.

How is the filming/creating process different to that of longer films?

The process for short films is very different. In a feature film, we get to see the whole journey of the main character and by the end of the film, we believe that they've changed for the better or for the worse. In a short film, we really just get a glimpse of a character, we get to share one moment, one event with the main character. We don't really expect them to completely change in those 10 minutes, but if it's done right, we can see the sparks of change.

I watched one of your short films Lost In Memories and was amazed at how much the film draws you in, in such a short space of time. What is the secret to captivating people like that in less than ten minutes?

Thank you. It's important that the audience quickly relate to the main character. The faster the audience can relate to the character, the faster we can get pulled into their world. Once the audience is engaged, it's just a matter of keeping the audience in the moment. From there, it just carrying the audience to the end and provide them with a bit of insight or a twist.

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Katie Kleiger is the actress who plays Robin; the young woman with SM. Read our interview with Katie to find out how she got on playing a character who has selective mutism.

Can you tell us a bit about yourself?

I am a stage and film actor currently transitioning to New York City, after having recently graduated from the University of Minnesota/Guthrie BFA Actor Training Program here in Minneapolis. I am from Washington, DC, but have spent the last four years in Minneapolis in training. Some of my recent credits include *Juno and the Paycock* and *A Christmas Carol* at the Guthrie, as well as *Home, Again* at the Kennedy Center. I am very excited to be part of this film, as I believe it tells a beautiful, compelling, and important story.

Congratulations on your part in the upcoming *Stuck In Mute* short film! How would you describe the character you are playing?

Robin is a young adult battling with a severe case of selective mutism. At the point where the film picks up, she finds herself completely unable to speak when she is around other people. She lives alone, and spends her days recording other people's conversations - conversations that she longs to have. Never seen without her headphones, Robin is constantly listening to these conversations and attempting to practice speaking, even though this is unbeknownst to her therapist. Robin attends group therapy for people with severe anxiety disorders, and the leader of that group suspects Robin of slacking off—attending group just for the snacks and not in an attempt to get better. Throughout the film, however, it becomes clear to the viewer that Robin is intent on getting better, and her drive, courage, and big heart help her make strides towards the ultimate goal: speaking.



Katie helping raise awareness of selective mutism

The woman you are playing has selective mutism - how much did you know about this disorder before you took on the role and what have you since found out about it?

To be completely honest, I knew nothing about it. I had not even heard of the term. One of my favorite parts of embodying any character is learning about them and broadening my range of knowledge of the world around me. That's why I was excited to have been given a character who deals with a disorder I was unfamiliar with: it gave me the chance to learn in depth about a disorder many people are unfamiliar with. Since being cast in this film, I have been researching selective mutism in depth, with the help of the director Shane Meuwissen. I remember being surprised when I learnt that selective mutism is most commonly not caused by trauma, but is instead an anxiety disorder. It is most common in children, and can sometimes dissolve as one grows older, so it is telling that Robin still suffers from this disorder as a young adult. The other thing that struck me was the actual physical block that one feels when trying to speak. Selective mutism can manifest itself as a real feeling in the throat, as opposed to just an unwillingness to speak.



On set: Katie and Gavin in character

Are there any characteristics in Robin which you also see in yourself?

I love Robin's creativity, something we are able to get a little glimpse into when we see her doodle-covered shoes. I also see a great compassion in Robin, which I believe, or I hope, to have as well. She is quite selfless when it comes down to it, and the friendship that she eventually forms with Jay comes out in a situation in which she sticks up for a child she doesn't even know.

How have you been getting into character and preparing for the role?

Conversations with the director, Shane, conversations with some therapists, and my own research on selective mutism have all helped me prepare for this role. For the past month, I have been slowly forming a three dimensional character with a history and a future, and I am excited to be able to embody her this month.

You've done a lot of theatre work, how does it differ from doing film?

There are entire books written about the difference between film acting and stage acting, but what it comes down to for me is just playing the space. When I am on a big stage with a large audience, the atmosphere is different and I need to adjust my performance in order to fill that atmosphere. When I am behind a camera, the atmosphere has changed drastically, and the body and voice naturally adjust to this new space. Additionally, it is about "stripping away" a lot of yourself in front of the camera. So often you find that you can just "be" in front of the camera, and that is enough. I find this actually very relaxing.

You list your skills to include sewing, climbing and stage combat. Were these learned for an acting part or have you always had a wide range of interests?

I have actually just had a wide range of interests, and in the acting world, the more skills you have the better. I grew up playing guitar and singing, and two of the three skills you mentioned (sewing and climbing), were both learned skills outside of the acting world. Stage combat, however, was a class I took in college with the University of Minnesota/Guthrie Program. You would not believe how helpful some basic stage combat skills can be in the theatre world!

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