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**Gabrielle Savage  
Dockterman  
Her Story of  
Wit and Stamina**

## **WOMEN WHO WORK IN THE INDUSTRY**

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# GABRIELLE SAVAGE DOCKTERMAN FOR HER FIRST



Gabrielle Savage Dockterman.  
Photo by Robert Pushkar.

For first-time feature filmmaker Gabrielle Savage Dockterman, landing Hollywood A-list actor Danny Glover to star in her movie, *WOODCUTTER*, was a dream come true. To Glover, it was love at first sight. He read the screenplay through twice after his agent passed it on to him. Later, Glover told her there was never any question that he wanted to play the role created originally by writer Ken Miller and expanded and contracted in a co-write by Dockterman, Nancy Babine, and Miller.

Dockterman, who was born in California and grew up in Montana and who has a degree from Harvard in engineering and computer science, was seeking a career shift from multimedia software design and production. She enjoyed the narrative aspect, especially directing and shooting the stories, which often involved working with live actors. In one project for the Smithsonian Institution, she directed seventy actors. But in the early 90s, Dockterman was ready for change, and gradually her efforts shifted.

In her own time she wrote a screenplay and began a family. Eventually she started a company, Angel Devil Productions, and began developing feature film scripts full time. For her first feature, she wanted a "powerful drama, character-driven, with an unforgettable story." In September 2000, a script that fit her criteria, *WOODCUTTER*, by Washington state writer Ken Miller, came across her desk. A Vietnam veteran, Miller wrote from experience, creating Lieutenant Jake Neeley, a decorated but conflicted veteran self-exiled in remote mountains in the Pacific Northwest who's searching for his own separate peace. Still, he's guilt-

wracked because of the lives lost under his command years ago. Suddenly, Neeley's retreat is abruptly shaken by a half-Vietnamese young girl, the daughter of an old army buddy, abandoned to his care.

Dockterman optioned the script in the fall of 2000. The story had grip and pull, she felt, and had potential, but she knew it could be even more powerful. She began to work with Miller on a rewrite. Via Harvard Square Scriptwriters, she brought in writer Nancy Babine, who coincidentally lives just down the road in Dockterman's hometown in Massachusetts. Using the Internet and email, they formed an unusual symbiosis. They had such different backgrounds and mindsets but their simpatico attitudes ruled. "When we all agreed something was good, we knew it was really good," Dockterman says sitting in her commodious living room with a sylvan view outside walls of gleaming

windows. "A lot of collaboration boils down to how much passion you have for your story."

There was virtually no writer's turf protection. Dockterman and Babine respected Miller's knowledge and judgments about soldiering and war. He was writing from the heart and from memory. He had tapped on real-life experience of a harrowing mission he undertook as a Green Beret and helicopter gunship pilot in Vietnam where he made a tactical error in a flyover and was shot out of the sky along with his crew. The mistake cost him the chopper but no loss of life, though the rescue by his wingman was miraculous. For

became once again more topical and timely. She was determined to continue, yet daunted by the reluctant, new marketplace for financing. Increasingly frustrated, Dockterman came to a crossroads. "I would go to Sundance," she says of that precarious time, "and if nothing comes out of it, that's it."

In a panel discussion at Sundance, she heard a bit of advice from Hollywood producer Barbara Boyle, answering a question from an attendee like herself, "a writer, director and producer by necessity." Boyle's message stuck: if you're just producing by necessity to get your film made, find yourself a producer who's producing because that's what they want to be, and partner with that



years afterward, he was haunted by the "what if" question had there been loss of life. The episode became grist for Miller's imagination. Adds Dockterman, "The main character is so much like Miller."

Together they wrote from emotional involvement with a well-tuned story and strongly driven characters. The two women writers hung out in a nearby eatery for hours on end brainstorming and talking out the script. Dockterman spoke to Miller on the telephone a few times but didn't meet him until he dropped by the set once shooting commenced a few years later. Meanwhile, Dockterman drew up a business plan and formed an LLC to produce the film independently. She raised some money but not enough for the scale of film she envisioned. After September 11, 2001, fundraising ground to a halt. While the economy made it more difficult than ever to attract funds for a film, suddenly their story about the lingering effects of Vietnam

person. "That was a description of me," Dockterman says. "I decided then I should partner with somebody, and that it should be somebody in New York or Los Angeles."

Afterward, she followed the de rigueur regimen of networking and exchanging business cards. Dockterman cemented a partnership in December 2002 with up-and-coming independent producers Isen Robbins and Aimee Schoof of Intrinsic Value in New York City. "It was really their passion for the project that sold me on them."

They decided to compile a list of actors, and they unabashedly aimed high. Danny Glover was at the top of their list to play the lead. "We were dreaming at that point and hoping to land a great actor whose passion for the role and the story would interest him enough to take a chance on a first-time director."



# PERMAN LANDS DANNY GLOVER FEATURE FILM



By Robert Pushkar

They hired New York casting director Adrienne Stern, who followed normal channels to land the script into Glover's hands with the help of someone at his agency. Then the waiting began. At one point they heard that it made it to the "next step." Dockterman wondered how many steps there were. When word filtered out the screenplay would be Glover's read for the weekend, the nail biting commenced.

Finally, word came down: Glover would play the lead. The coveted "attachment" from an A-list actor now would be affixed to the script. The new cachet, as every filmmaker knows, ratchets up a screenplay's stock, and

vet" living deep in the woods. Linda Hamilton of TERMINATOR fame would play "Kate," the feisty widowed storekeeper who is Neeley's only contact with society. "Henry," the little girl's dying father, would be played by David Strathairn (L.A. CONFIDENTIAL, DOLORES CLAIBORNE).

By late autumn 2003, six months after their initial meeting with Glover, shooting was nearly ready to commence on location in North Vancouver, British Columbia. All pieces of the production were in place save one—the child lead and pivotal character in the story. "We looked at so many girls," Dockterman says wearily even now, as if the

Through her former acting teacher, Peter Berkrot of Beverly, MA, Dockterman zeroed in on a newfound possibility. She viewed a tape. The cute little girl had potential. She requested a further audition on DVD and talked with the girl on the phone and in a video teleconference. "Can you imagine auditioning in front of a monitor?" she asks rhetorically.

After an audition in person in Vancouver mere days before shooting was to begin, Zoe Weizenbaum from Amherst, Mass. became Dockterman's choice. Though at twelve she was untrained and had no professional experience, the child actress shined once the cameras began to roll. By

as a guide. Then the actors bring a whole other layer of raw material. And then in the edit room you've got all that great raw material, and now you've got to use it in the most powerful way and let go of what you don't need. A good actor will say a half a page of dialogue with his eyes. Sometimes it more powerful to let his eyes tell the story and leave out the words. Less is often so much more."

The next challenge is to find a distributor to get WOODCUTTER out into theaters. Dockterman and company have begun the work to get venues in film festivals where distribution deals are often struck.

Apparently, Dockterman has struck a balance between the rigors of filmmaking and the challenges of being a mother. Her husband David and son Jake have been very supportive of her work, and she has been able to juggle the demands of her job with mom duties such as involvement in school activities. In the weeks while she was away during the shooting, her husband assumed home responsibilities, which allowed her the time she needed to get the job done. "I could take my time. That's a luxury I had along with total creative control from the get-go. That was absolutely wonderful to me.

"I love imagery. I've always been a painter. I used to do it a lot. I guess filmmaking is my way of doing it."

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:

Co-writer Ken Miller, Danny Glover, and writer-director-producer Gabrielle Savage Dockterman on WOODCUTTER location in British Columbia. Photo by Carole Segal

One of the toughest shoot days on WOODCUTTER. Cast and crew were perched precariously on the top of a cliff. Photo by Simon Hunt.

Danny Glover as "Jake" and Zoë Weizenbaum as "Lenny" in Gabrielle Savage Dockterman's film, WOODCUTTER. Photo by Eike Schroter



money often follows. What they didn't know was that Glover had a deep-rooted empathy for Vietnam veterans because he was personally touched by its aftereffects even though three decades had passed. Like the little girl's father in WOODCUTTER, Glover's kid brother had died just two and half years previously from respiratory complications caused by exposure to Agent Orange, the toxic defoliant wantonly used in the Southeast Asian war. Screenwriter Ken Miller himself had lost friends to the affliction, including two fellow soldiers in a period of two weeks in 1999. Both died of lung cancer attributed to exposure to Agent Orange.

Having Glover attached to the project led to more casting victories. Ron Perlman, recently having wrapped HELLBOY, signed on to play "Red," a damaged, mute "bush

remembered dilemma still causes sleeplessness. The production was a little over a week away from rehearsals and no actress had been chosen for the role of Lenny, the sudden orphan who is dropped in the lap of the bush vet who wants nothing to do with a palpable reminder of the war he thinks he left behind.

"It was a huge casting challenge. She had to be a great actress, Amerasian, and be at least twelve years old so that she could work more hours a day than a younger child would be allowed to under union rules, and yet look younger, like a little girl as opposed to a budding teen," Dockterman says. "And she had to be feisty to stand up to Danny Glover, but at the same time pull at your heart strings." After looking all over North America, Dockterman had lined up a second choice, but not a first.

then, she was side-by-side professionals like Glover who really helped her blossom.

"Danny Glover was brilliant. All my actors brought so much thought to it and were so creative in their own right. There were many times I felt like I was really in the presence of greatness. I would get goose bumps all the time."

Of filmmaking, Dockterman says, "Every step of the process is a little scary at first. Then you get into the swing of it, and it's great. The hardest part is just the stamina you have to have, the four hours of sleep a night you get for three months."

But she drew inspiration by the talent around her. "At each stage you're producing raw material for the next stage. First the script is raw material for the actors to use

Writer-photographer Robert Pushkar is a regular contributor to IMAGINE. Currently, he is marketing his romantic comedy screenplay. He can be reached at [rgp@robertpushkar.com](mailto:rgp@robertpushkar.com)