

Production Slate

The documentary *After Tiller*, shot by Hillary Spera and Emily Topper, features medical doctors (clockwise from top left) LeRoy Carhart, Shelley Sella, Warren Hern and Susan Robinson.



Unique Perspectives on Abortion

By Rachael K. Bosley

When George Tiller, M.D., was assassinated in his church in Wichita, Kan., one Sunday morning in 2009, the number of physicians qualified to provide third-trimester abortions in the United States shrank from five to four. By focusing on those four doctors and the patients they serve, the new documentary *After Tiller* illuminates a controversial facet of health care that is often in the headlines but seldom presented in all its complexity. “Unless you understand what’s going on with the woman [who seeks a late-term abortion], you can’t support it—how could you?” observes Shelley Sella, M.D., one of the specialists featured in the film.

No one who sets out to make a documentary can know how it will finally take shape, but that question loomed especially large for *After Tiller* directors Lana Wilson and Martha Shane because of the film’s topic, which made fundraising difficult, and the doctors’ acute intersecting concerns about privacy and personal security, which had increased exponentially after Tiller’s murder. In fact, when the directors commenced shooting with cinematographer Emily Topper, in May 2010, only two of the four physicians, Warren Hern, M.D., and LeRoy Carhart, M.D., had agreed to participate, and both were quite wary. “It’s always a question with a *vérité* film: Will it happen? Will it materialize? Will it unfold in a way that makes it possible to make a film? And that was especially true on this project,” says Topper. “The

doctors were initially so guarded I wondered if we would be able to make a film about them. It took a long time to earn their trust; it was one small step at a time.”

Tiller had been a friend and colleague of all four physicians, and the two who initially declined to participate in the film, Sella and Susan Robinson, M.D., had worked with him at his clinic. “Dr. Tiller had a very clear policy of doing no media, so the female doctors did, too,” explains Shane. “Once they started to get a little more distance [from Kansas] and opened their new practice in Albuquerque, they started to think harder about it. Then, they participated in Rachel Maddow’s documentary [MSNBC’s *The Assassination of Dr. Tiller*] and did not experience an uptick in death threats, and I think that gave them more confidence.”

Roughly a year into the *After Tiller* shoot, Robinson and Sella came aboard. “We made it clear to all the doctors that we would protect any part of their privacy they wanted to have protected,” Shane continues. “At first we thought we might have to [avoid showing] their homes and their cars, for instance. In some cases that was true, but in other cases the anti-abortion movement already knew where they lived.”

Topper recalls that Shane and Wilson were specific about their visual plan from the beginning. “They had a clearly designed vision in their heads, and they wanted to privilege the cinematography because they fully understood how it could contribute to the tone they wanted,” she says. “One [reference] they brought up

After Tiller frame grabs courtesy of Oscilloscope Laboratories.



Top: Dr. Sella puts a patient at ease.
Middle: A long day takes a temporary toll on Dr. Robinson.
Bottom: Dr. Hern comforts a patient.

early on was the documentary *Last Train Home* [2009], which is *vérité* but doesn't feel like it. It has a lot of tableau scenes, shots are often held a lot longer than is typical, and many scenes play out in a master. I

tried to keep that in the back of my mind as we worked."

There are two components to *After Tiller's* look: *vérité* footage, which encompasses activity in and around the clinics (and,

eventually, glimpses of the doctors' personal lives), and portrait-style interviews with each doctor. For the first shoot, which lasted two weeks and involved Hern's clinic in Boulder, Colo., and Carhart's clinic in Bellevue, Neb., Topper shot *vérité* material with Shane's own Sony PMW EX-1 (recording 1920x1080 24p in 35Mbps HQ and capturing to SxS cards), and interviews with the doctors with a locally rented Canon EOS 5D Mark II and Canon L-series 24-105mm T4 zoom (recording 1920x1080 to CF cards).

Existing light was the rule for *vérité* material, "but Lana and Martha did not want the clinics to look institutional or ugly, so they were very careful about the art direction," says Topper. "Whenever they had a chance to make things prettier, they took it — getting a houseplant just so, or making sure the window light was streaming in in an attractive way." For the interviews with the doctors, she continues, "the goal was a warm, cozy feel, with a nice falloff in focus. Martha and Lana wanted the doctors to look as motherly and fatherly as possible." Lighting for these scenes was a simple bounce setup and depended on what could be rented locally, usually a small Kino Flo or Lowel Rifa.

The initial shoot enabled the directors to create a piece to show potential funders, and they had to wait for more funding to come through to resume shooting. "It was a difficult project in that regard because funders kept saying, 'This looks interesting, but we just want to see where you're going to come down on this issue,'" recalls Shane. "A lot of them were reluctant to support the film until they could see a rough cut, and we understood that."

By the time they could resume shooting, Topper was in India on another feature, so the directors brought on cinematographer Hillary Spera. Shane notes that because *After Tiller's* shoot progressed sporadically over 18 months, "it made sense schedule-wise to have two cinematographers. Later in the shoot, when Hillary landed another feature, Emily rejoined us, and then Hillary was able to come back to supervise the color timing."

Given the settings and subject matter, both directors believed it essential to have a woman behind the camera, and



Cinematographers Emily Topper (left) and Hillary Spera at work on other projects.

Shane emphasizes that Topper and Spera had both impressed them with their *vérité* work. “Hillary and Emily are very patient cinematographers, and that was key. We wanted *After Tiller* to be the antithesis of reality TV in terms of style, and we could tell by looking at their work that they would deliver that. Also, they are both really wonderful people, and that was just as important because we knew we’d be sharing a hotel room and spending a lot of time together in tiny spaces!” (It was a crew of three; the directors took turns recording sound. “It was the smallest setup it could possibly be,” says Spera.)

The filmmakers agree that *After Tiller’s* look really fell into place when Spera joined the team, in part because she suggested shooting the *vérité* material with a Sony PMW-EX3 and Letus Ultimate adapter, which enabled them to use a range of vintage Zeiss 35mm film lenses she has collected over the years. “We were shooting in some fairly bland environments, and I knew the vintage primes would allow us to use shallow focus and some softness to temper the fluorescent lighting and drab interiors and make the clinics look warm and inviting, which is what the directors wanted,” says Spera.

“I had used this camera/lens package on a number of previous documentary projects, and I’d built it specifically so that I could move quickly while still getting great images,” she continues. “I’ve collected two sets of Zeiss primes [ranging from 18mm to 135mm] that were made for a Contax

camera back in the day, and had them rehoused to fit my Letus adapter. It’s more common to shoot docs with zoom lenses, but I think primes elevate the image, and I work very quickly with them. Most of the lenses are f1.4, but some of the wider ones are f2.8. On this movie, I tried to get the lens as wide open as possible to limit the depth-of-field, and I sometimes used the [EX3’s] internal ND filters to help with that a bit.”

Because a majority of the clinics’ patients are walk-ins, the filmmakers showed up each day not knowing whether they would have anything to shoot. Shane explains, “We’d set up our equipment in a room off to the side and wait. When a patient showed up, the counselor would explain that there were filmmakers in the clinic and briefly describe our project, and then she’d say, ‘If you’re interested in learning more, you can go talk to them.’ A lot of them just didn’t come to see us. I would estimate that fewer than 10 percent did. When we couldn’t film a patient with a doctor, we’d try to shoot other activity in the clinic.”

As with all *vérité* work, patience and sharp observational skills were key. Spera recalls, “I spent hours upon hours with patients and doctors, watching and listening. Sometimes I could only observe through the audio feed of a lav mic in another room, and I had to be ready at a moment’s notice if we were granted permission to film. I tried to learn all the ways grief and joy were exhibited so I could

try to sense an individual’s emotions without having to look her or him in the eye, because I felt this would make me less intimidating and more of a fly-on-the-wall. Gradually, it became intuitive to be around people in extreme grief and be sensitive to both their privacy and their emotional processes.”

Patients’ faces never appear on camera. Their emotions are conveyed by voice and body language, often through close-ups of their hands as they speak. “Those small gestures were so pronounced to me it became almost a non-issue that we couldn’t show their faces,” Spera says. The 50mm Zeiss prime “was great for isolating those details,” she adds.

“Hillary moved everything in a more filmic direction, and Martha and Lana were very pleased with the results, so my job was to pick up where she left off when I came back on,” says Topper. “Whatever parts of her camera package she couldn’t leave with us we re-created with gear from local rental houses.” (Spera’s Zeiss lenses were also adapted to a Canon mount so they could be used for the DSLR material, which was shot with a rented 5D or Spera’s own 7D.)

Negotiating the small spaces in the clinics was a constant challenge for the cinematographers. “It was a matter of finding a spot in the room where I could stay backed off and still choose the angles that would best tell the story,” says Spera. Topper adds, “It was always a judgment call about the comfort level of doctor and patient. On a couple of occasions, we were

Emily Topper photo by Djakhangir Zakhidov, courtesy of Topper. Hillary Spera photo by Michael Sera, courtesy of Alaska Film.

able to film a group discussion, and we went into the room ahead of time and arranged the furniture, moving it closer in so we could quietly move around behind the patients to shoot over their shoulders.”

Another unpredictable element during the shoot was the anti-abortion movement, whose supporters maintain near-constant vigils outside the clinics. “Lana and Martha explained to the protestors that we were profiling the doctors, and the protestors were happy to be filmed because they wanted their voices heard,” says Topper. “I was nervous about that material, nervous about shooting images that could play into stereotypes on both sides of the debate, but I feel we didn’t do that.” Spera adds, “I found shooting the protests really hard, but for psychological reasons rather than logistical ones. I never felt totally unsafe, but I always kept that other eye open. There were a lot of them and only three of us. We were usually right next to them, but sometimes I’d throw a long lens on the camera and shoot from down the block.”

After Tiller also includes footage, some from TV news, of larger protests related to Carhart’s practice. During the course of filming, Nebraska enacted a law banning abortion after the 20th week of pregnancy, and when Carhart tried to move the abortion component of his practice to another state, abortion opponents rallied to prevent it. (They were successful in Iowa but unsuccessful in Maryland, where Carhart’s clinic is today.) Shane recalls, “Nebraska introduced that law shortly after we started shooting, and we just tried to be there as much as possible as Dr. Carhart tried to find another site for his practice. The news footage filled in a lot of the details we missed. We wanted to make a film that would explore moral and ethical issues, an essay film, but we felt it needed a driving narrative backbone, and Dr. Carhart’s story gave us that.”

Shane notes that the film’s editor, Greg O’Toole, who shares a writing credit with her and Wilson, had “a huge hand in shaping the story. When we sat down to start crafting the film, he had so many great insights. Creating the building blocks of the story was a collaborative process that involved all three of us.”

O’Toole worked on the edit fulltime

for about nine months, working with Apple ProRes 422 LT QuickTime files in Final Cut Pro 7. (Throughout the shoot, the directors saved footage on two portable LaCie drives, with one serving as backup. To transcode footage for the edit, they used Sony XDCam EX Transfer Utility and Canon EOS Movie.) “The archival footage in the film was ripped from DVDs or came from online sources, and Mike Nicholson at Picturebox [in Austin, Texas] used After Effects to uprez it and treat it with some filters,” reports O’Toole. “I’ve found that After Effects is as good at up-rezzing low-quality material as the more expensive options, and [the filters] allowed us to create a look that helped unify that mix of footage.” To output the final for color correction, O’Toole went back to the original camera files and used Compressor to cross-convert them to ProRes HQ.

For the color correction, at Nice Dissolve Digital Cinema in Brooklyn, N.Y., colorist Moritz Fortmann graded on DaVinci Resolve 9. Spera, who spent a day in the grading suite with him, recalls, “I think the biggest challenges were matching the mixed fluorescent lighting in the clinics, and timing out the strobing of those fixtures because we had to rely on existing light so often.”

After Tiller went through a number of informal test screenings before and after it landed a spot in the U.S. Documentary Competition at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival. “We tested every possible way to tell the story,” says Shane. Topper recalls seeing early and final cuts and being quite struck by the difference. “I felt the early cut was quite safe in a way,” she says. “It was a very warm portrait of these four people, and it was missing the harder questions that are raised in the final cut. I am just so thrilled Martha and Lana pushed past that to make the film what it is now. It’s a great portrait, but there is also a really intense conversation playing out while you watch it.”

TECHNICAL SPECS

16:9

Digital Capture

Sony PMW-EX3, PMW-EX1;
Canon EOS 5D, 7D

Zeiss, Canon, Fujinon



Jon (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) pumps iron in *Don Jon*, shot by Thomas Kloss.

A Ladies’ Man Evolves

By Patricia Thomson

Don Jon is the kind of porn movie even a mother could love. “It’s about Internet porn, but ultimately, that’s just a catalytic converter or accelerator for the humor within the story,” says director of photography Thomas Kloss.

Don Jon is a stylish comedy about how familial experiences and media shape our ideas about what’s desirable in the opposite sex. Porn is just one player; romantic movies are another, as are *Cosmopolitan* covers, beauty pageants, women’s beach volleyball and TV commercials.

When the movie begins, Jon (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) is a successful Don Juan. He and his buddies regularly hit the clubs and bring women home for one-night stands. Jon supplements these experiences with daily doses of Internet porn, but his habit causes problems when he falls for “a dime” — a 10-rated woman, Barbara (Scarlett Johansson) — whose expectations have been shaped by a steady diet of romance movies. Eventually, Jon meets an older woman, Esther (Julianne Moore), who motivates him to try a different route to bliss.

Kloss, a 30-year veteran of commercials and music videos, has shot his share of features (among them 2011’s *Conan the Barbarian*), but few low-budget ones. Nonetheless, the Los Angeles-based cine-