

On Set with Kate Winslet and Josh Brolin: My Son's 'Labor Day' Adventure

Robin Schoenthaler, MD

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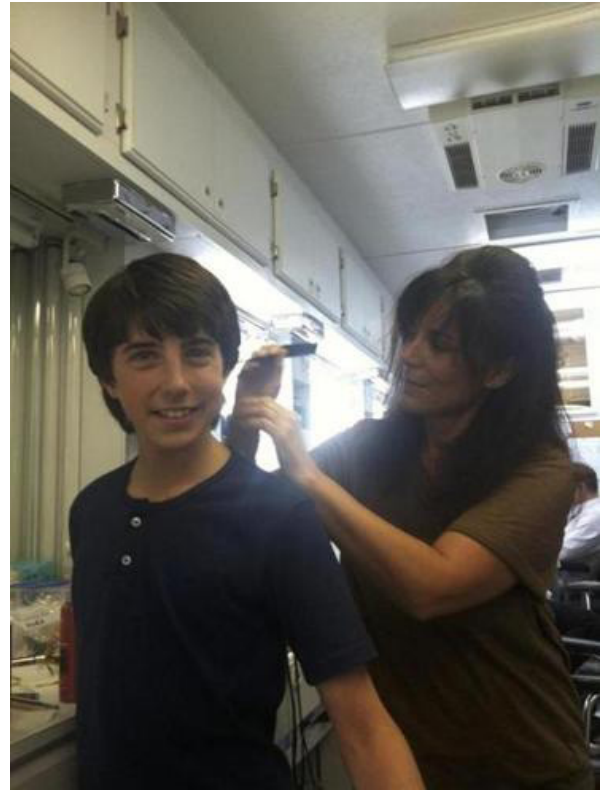
MY SON COOPER is supposed to be giving Kate Winslet a massage. It's not going all that well. He's patting her shoulders like he's fluting a pie crust. The director tells him to push a little harder. He taps again, tentatively, as though she's a keyboard. Kate turns her long neck, looks up over her Titanic shoulder, and gazes into Cooper's eyes. "Coo-pah," she says with her posh English accent, "you cannot break me. I assure you, you can press harder, and I will not break."

Cooper is 13 years old. He has never given anybody a massage in his life. He and Kate are being filmed in a house in Acton that has been converted into a movie set for Paramount Pictures' *Labor Day*, which arrived in theaters in January. A gazillion-dollar camera is aimed at Coop's hands, and two dozen people are studying his every move. I am sitting in an attic screening room, watching on a monitor, and trying not to faint. Coop tries again. Now he looks like he's patting our dog.

The director, Jason Reitman, best known for *Up in the Air* and *Juno*, steps up and says, also kindly: "Coop, if you're going to massage her, you need to actually touch her. Go ahead, dude. Put your thumbs in her back and your fingers in her shoulders and dig in."

Cooper takes a deep breath and moves his feet a couple of inches apart. He presses his thumbs into Kate's back, curls his fingers around her shoulders, and digs in. He gives Kate Winslet her massage. Jason smiles. I smile. Coop exhales.

Whereupon Jason asks him to do it again. And again.



After six takes he says it's a wrap, and we are done for the night. Kate pats Coop on the arm, says, "You did great," and glides off to a waiting car.

In the monitor room, I exhale, too. It is not every day I watch my son try to give a massage to an Academy Award-winning devastatingly beautiful actress, and I'm uncertain how to address this particular rite of passage. I press my forehead against the windowpane and gaze out at the movie apparatus spread all over this suburban yard. I watch the police detail out front directing traffic and the crew streaming from the house and climbing into vans. Then I walk down the stairs to join Cooper on the set.

It's July 2012, and Coop's been working on *Labor Day*

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for two weeks. I've been with him most of the time, but I'm still walking around like a geeky fangirl, gaping at, among other things, how a modern suburban home can be renovated to look like a falling-down New Hampshire farmhouse. I step over cables and electrical cords taped to the floorboards, past an ice-chest-size makeup kit sitting on a table, beyond a woman pulling Post-it notes off a script, around the broad-based security guy who grins as I walk by. I collect Cooper and we move past the cameras and the dollies and the light screens hanging from metal bars hammered into the ceiling.

Driving down Route 2, I look at my son — he has not said a word — and I hesitate. Finally I say, "Well, bud, you just gave Kate Winslet a massage." He says, "Yeah?" I add, "I think it is entirely possible you've just had one of the peak experiences of your life and it is all downhill from here." He replies, "Yeah, maybe you're right," and leans against the car door and stares out into space. And then I pull to a stop at a light, we look at each other, and we both start shrieking with laughter.

Two weeks on the job and we are still flabbergasted — absolutely dumbfounded — that he is spending his summer working on a giant Hollywood movie. How could this be happening to us?

WE ARE PROBABLY the least likely family in Massachusetts to end up on a movie set. Cooper is a typical seventh-grade kid from Arlington. He has no show-business aspirations; we can all agree his single appearance as an Oompa Loompa in the fifth-grade play at Bishop Elementary, while adorable, was probably not career-launching. I am a typical Boston cancer doc and have never had a drop of stage mom in me or the opportunity to act as one.

But two weeks earlier we heard about a job opening for Labor Day. Cooper had been on the mailing list for Boston Casting for a year or so, intrigued by the idea of making \$65 a day as an extra like a friend had done in *Mall Cop*. Cooper had gotten audition e-mails before, but it had never worked out — he'd been the wrong age or the wrong ethnicity or filming was on a school day.

This e-mail is different. They're looking for a "photo double" who could be filmed in the place of the movie's young star, 13-year-old Gattlin Griffith, from behind or a distance, while the action happens around him. The e-mail says they need a boy under 5-foot-2 with straight brown hair.

Cooper replies and is invited to meet the director in an industrial building behind an endoscopy suite in Acton. Jason Reitman (called JR on set) is known for coaxing Oscar-level performances out of actors like George Clooney, but today his only request is for Cooper to swivel so he can look at the back of his neck. JR retreats a few steps, peering at Cooper's nape through the pretend camera he forms with his fingers. He stares at Cooper's neck for a good long time, looks pensive, and then ambles away.

It turns out Cooper's neck is perfect. A production assistant comes over and smiles at Cooper. The first thing he says is "JR wants to hire Cooper," and the second thing is "and they need Cooper in Makeup." The speed with which this all happens is dizzying. Shortly thereafter Cooper is, indeed, in Makeup and then he's at Hair (where Kate walks in) and then he's in Wardrobe (where Josh Brolin strolls by), and during all this we sign a pile of papers and learn Cooper may be needed every weekday until mid-August, sometimes until late at night, and will make \$19 an hour. Cooper's eyes widen and I can see him doing mental how-long-does-it-take-to-earn-a-MacBook-Air-at-19-dollars-

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an-hour calculations in his head, and right then we are driven to the set, where Coop shakes hands again with JR and is introduced to Josh and Kate, and I am led to my new home in the attic, since “it’s best not to have eye contact with the child.” In less than two minutes the camera begins to roll and my boy is in the picture. Or at least the back of his neck is.

They must also re-shoot this scene a number of times, and from my perch I see and hear it all. For the first four takes, my eyes never leave Coop’s neck and shoulder. I can tell he’s nervous; his breathing is deep and ragged. For the last three takes, I can’t stop gazing at Kate’s eyes.

On the drive home that night Coop says, “This is a really big deal, isn’t it?” and I pat him on the knee and say, “Yes, it is. You were great.” I am nearly trembling with the day’s events but I am trying my best not to gush, so I say, “And it all happened because you stuck your neck out.” We start laughing and make more neck jokes, and then we map out a schedule for the rest of the summer.

Since I have to work much of the next six weeks, I am hoping we might have a few friends who will be willing to be Coop’s adult guardian on set when I’m at the clinic. His brother, Kenzie, is only 17, not old enough to fill the role. I make a couple of calls. It turns out we have so many friends who want to spend their day at a Hollywood movie production that I have to create an Excel spreadsheet.

We leap into a moviemaking apprenticeship. We meet electricians and location scouts and cooks. We hang out with hairdressers and makeup artists and truck drivers. Most afternoons Coop’s the only non-adult on the set, which matters not a bit. We learn Coop’s job is a small one (we’re not even certain he’ll get a credit) but absolutely crucial. When Gattlin goes off duty

and they need Coop on the set, they need him right this second. There is a small Massachusetts village — a makeup artist from the North Shore, the hairstylist from Somerville, a wardrobe assistant from west of 495, and a pack of local Teamster drivers — that helps get Coop to the set clean, coiffed, and clothed. Above all, we learn he is never to get wet: Raindrops on makeup and wardrobe can wreck a movie shot. The mere threat of a shower means a production assistant will walk Cooper to the set holding an umbrella over his head. Of all the things Coop loves about being in the movies, this umbrella-holding is way at the top of his list. Cooper prays for rain.

Everywhere and with everybody, Cooper absorbs something about work and ethics and patience. He masters being meticulously on time, just like everybody else, and ready to be “on.” He figures out how to be open to critique and requests to do the same thing again and again — difficult tasks for a teen. He repeats every tip he hears from the crew and remembers every kindness. He raves about a returning supporting actor who yells across the set: “Coop, you were right. I loved Battlestar Galactica!”

The movie set in Acton and our house in Arlington are 17 miles apart. The commute home, down an often-empty Route 2, becomes our decompression chamber with chitchat very different from our school-year banter about quizzes and teachers and who-did-you-sit-with-at-lunch. Coop talks about being shaky inside and laughing with the crew and how Josh was so nice to him on the set. I talk about the interdependent roles of the cast and crew and describe some of the work and life choices they have made over the years. I tell him stories about child stars’ trajectories, and he theorizes about what must have transpired to make them crash and burn. On one particularly gratifying ride home, he offhandedly ponders, “Maybe growing up with people holding umbrellas over your

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head makes it hard to end up normal.”

One late-night shoot is particularly challenging. He is to be filmed walking down a narrow hallway while the camera rolls on a dolly behind him. They show Coop videos of Gattlin walking earlier while JR explains: “Gattlin walked this way, and turned his head at this angle. Now you do this, too.” Then he adds: “Stop a few feet outside the door, here, no, here, and curve your hand around this light switch. Now turn, lift your leg, and shift your weight so the camera can roll around you.” Cooper does all this while the camera, filming the edge of his shoulder, focuses on Kate and Josh embroiled in conversation in her bedroom.

Coop walks the walk perfectly but something goes awry with the dolly. He walks again, but this time too quickly. He walks again, but Josh's makeup needs retouching. He walks again, but his hand isn't in the right position. He walks again. They fiddle with lights and dust motes in the bedroom; he leans against the wall and nearly falls asleep standing. JR calls out, “Camera rolling.” Coop wakes up and walks again and again.

AS HAPPENS WITH most time-limited events, the experience gets richer as it winds down. Shooting at night becomes particularly magical. We carry on

hushed conversations with the crew in the darkness. Crossing the deserted Acton road, Coop and I compare our long shadows, illuminated only by the movie lights. We can see people brushing their teeth in the surrounding houses while Kate Winslet drifts by us in the night.

Then it's their last day in Acton. The food tables are being emptied. Trucks and trailers are leaving the lot. He's sitting in the makeup trailer with Kate, Josh, and some of the crew and having his hair extensions taken out. Coop says, “I feel like Britney,” and the whole trailer laughs with him. They clasp him on the shoulders, they shake his hand, and we are gone.

We drive home in silence, 17 miles, for the last time, and life returns to our semblance of normal.

People go to Hollywood for fame and fortune. My son got neither; in the end, he isn't even in the movie credits. But Cooper did get a glimpse into creativity and collaboration. He got a taste of what it means to work with patience and vision. He learned to step out of his comfort zone and hit his marks anyway. He gained an appreciation for a regular paycheck and a lifelong affection for umbrellas. And he gets to win, for the rest of his life, at Truth or Dare, because, yes, he really did give Kate Winslet that massage. You can see it at the movies.