

# Nichols v. Hollywood

The director behind the beautiful, probing *Loving* talks jumping the hurdle from indie to mainstream, changing the way Hollywood thinks and the kinds of conversations he hopes his new film will inspire *By Frances Dodds* Photographed by Jesse Chehak

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**F**OR NEARLY THE PAST decade, the writer and director Jeff Nichols has been playing hard to get. Granted, it's left him hungrier than the movie studios he's flirting with, but the 37-year-old filmmaker—whose latest work, *Loving*, premieres in

November—has a notion he can't shake: that studios should invest in films with narratives which subvert the type of formulaic storytelling viewers have come to expect. That's not to say Nichols doesn't want to make mainstream movies; it's that he wants to change what mainstream means.

The Austin-based director made his first film, the gritty drama *Shotgun Stories*, in 2007. The *New York Times* called the tale of feuding brothers "as cool-headed as its characters are reckless." Nichols' refusal to freight his films with the kind of fill-in-the-blank framework typical of more conventional cinema established him as a genre-bending visionary. It also stumped the Hollywood revenue machine. The writer-director followed his debut with *Take Shelter*, *Mud* and, earlier this year, *Midnight Special*—a family drama that blooms into a strange and beautiful science-fiction fantasia, with little interest in "explaining" the world it introduces to its



GROOMING BY DANIELE PIERSONS FOR EXCLUSIVE ARTISTS MANAGEMENT USING KEVIN MURPHY. VERY SPECIAL THANKS TO FREEMANS ALLEY, NYC.

viewers. The film received fervent applause from critics but, disappointingly, scarce widespread attention.

Which is why so much hangs on *Loving*. The filmmaker's first foray into historical—and in this case, political—drama, the movie tells the story of Richard and Mildred Loving, whose landmark 1967 Supreme Court case, *Loving v. Virginia*, struck down the state's bans on interracial marriage.

Now, as the film garners serious Oscar buzz, Nichols is finally being courted by suitors with deep pockets. He just signed a deal for a "big war film" with Fox, about which he'll say only, "I've been thinking a lot about aliens." As he inches closer to redefining the blockbuster in his own nuanced image, the Southern filmmaker speaks about the changes he hopes to see in the world from which he draws inspiration.

**"IT'S REALLY WEIRD GROWING UP IN THE SOUTH: THERE ARE SO MANY MONUMENTS TO CIVIL WAR BATTLES, BUT VERY FEW TO CIVIL RIGHTS BATTLES."**



I think about politics as much as anyone else, especially this year. But I actually think of *Loving* as an antidote to political thinking. Richard and Mildred didn't want to force an agenda on people. And, laying out this film, I didn't want to force an agenda on people [either]. To be honest, it's why I felt okay with trying to tell their story. Like, I'm a middle-

class white kid born in 1978. What business do I have making a film, technically about a piece of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s? I don't, but I thought I understood these people and something about their nature.

You know, everybody wants to be on the right side of history. And everybody wants to get on a soapbox and preach. But I come from a part of the country where I disagree with the social views of a lot of people who are friends and family members, and I know the way to have those conversations with those people is not by yelling at them. It's not, 'You're stupid and you're closed-minded and uneducated.' I'm going to say, 'Well, try to think about the people at the center of this.' That's the best shot we have. It may not work—but it certainly has a higher chance than the more aggressive option.

I'm not very well versed in social media, but I know it's probably one of the worst places to have social dialogue, because people are so far removed from the humanity of the conversation. It makes sense. We're alone, typing on a computer—



machine—so it's very easy to be your most aggressive in that situation. But when you sit two people in a room together, I dare you. I dare you to be as aggressive and dismissive of a person's existence.

I had communications with someone back in Arkansas, an older gentleman who I really respect very much, who has been a mentor in my life. He said to me, 'Jeff, it's so great that you're telling this *Loving* story. So great, so great. Because that was a really big issue that we dealt with. And that's just a good thing.' And I was like, 'Thanks, I'm so glad you said that.' Because when you're talking to an older white gentleman in the South, you never know. And then I said, 'Well you know, it has a lot to do with what's happening now with marriage equality.' And he said, 'Ha! No, no, no. No, that's a different issue. The Bible was very clear about that.' So we're not done with these conversations. They're going to be awkward. They're going to be uncomfortable and aggressive. At times they are going to be violent. But we have to figure out how to have them, and not let them become violent.

It's really weird growing up in the South: There are so many monuments to Civil War battles, but very few to Civil Rights battles. I think nonviolence feels like a foregone conclusion as part of our nation's civil rights history, but it's extraordinary that these young men and women in the 1960s were committed to the teachings of Gandhi and to nonviolence. They saw through something that, for all intents and purposes, needed to be met with violence and anger because their subjugation was so disgusting and apparent. But they trained themselves to answer through nonviolence. It's such a bold thing. I think you mention nonviolence today and people are like, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know about that.' But there doesn't seem to be the same level of commitment to why it was important." ■

Nichols directs lead actors Joel Edgerton and Ruth Negga on the Richmond, Virginia set of *Loving*.