

'Who am I to judge?'

Actor Paul Bettany discusses the personal experiences that inspired him to write 'Shelter,' a film about homelessness



PHOTO BY MARIO ANZUONI / REUTERS

Actor Paul Bettany, who's appeared in films such as "Avengers: Age of Ultron" and "A Beautiful Mind," made his directorial debut with "Shelter."

BY PAUL BETTANY
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

I didn't start off wanting to make a film about homelessness. I wanted to direct a movie, and then thought I might rather like to make one about judgment. I have this worry that in a world full of increasing gray areas, we're becoming more entrenched in black and white positions.

I live in New York, on the Hudson River. There is a tiny triangular park on the corner of Canal and the West Side Highway where this homeless couple lived. I passed them every day on the school run and would try to talk to them. My kids

would say good morning. But more and more, I'm ashamed to say, I began not to be able to see them. Somehow they became part of the landscape of the city I live in.

Then Hurricane Sandy happened. There was a mandatory evacuation of downtown riverside Manhattan. In the madness of getting my three kids, dog and cat and wife in the car, I didn't stop to think where they — my neighbors — would weather the storm. I never saw them again. I couldn't stop thinking about them. I'm sure they were fine and had moved on, but I imagined what their lives might have been and they became a template for a film about judgment.

Why do we treat homelessness the way we do? I think it's got something to do with fear, a terror that one might end up there, so an absolute, resolute, this-could-never-happen-to-me attitude — you must have done something yourself to bring yourself so low.

In New York, homelessness has spiraled out of control in the last 10 to 15 years. Social housing — I need to say public housing here because the word social gets everybody's back up in America — has been slashed by 32 percent. There are 60,000 homeless people in the municipal shelter system every night — and 24,000 of those are children.

Last year in New York, the first apartment for \$100 million was sold — yet thousands are in the municipal shelter system every night. That is untenable, but you'd be a fool and a communist to draw a line between rising rents and the lack of rising wages. Simply providing people with legal representation would stop a crazy amount of evictions. A homeless family is 80 percent less likely to be evicted if the family has counsel. Counsel costs the city \$12,500, while the average stay of a homeless family in a shelter is \$45,000. Morally it makes sense, but it also makes sense politically.

The state of Utah has hugely reduced homelessness by thinking outside the box. The local government worked out it was cheaper and more effective to house homeless people rather than keeping them on the streets. That seems to be paying off. Of course, in a capitalist society, people are screaming, "Nanny state!" and, "How can someone get something for nothing?"

The problem is, it worked. It's difficult to ignore that fact. The reasons for homelessness are myriad: the loss of a job, loss of a family member, a breakdown, and yes, drug or alcohol addiction. Everybody has a story. Who am I to judge?

My father died recently. He was a very religious man. Whenever we passed a homeless person, he would always say, there

but for the grace of God go I. And I love that sentiment. It's an admission of how close we all are to slipping by the wayside.

When I was about 17 years old, I had a family loss. I came down to London and ended up outside the boarding house where my sister was living. I used to throw a stone at her window, and when the woman who owned the rooms was asleep, she would let me sneak in and sleep on the floor.

That was a huge period of time for me. I was not in my best mind. I was grieving. I was not well. There were times I didn't get into that room and slept on a park bench. I never thought of myself as homeless, and I wouldn't want to overstate that, but it absolutely felt that my safety and situation were precarious.

I busked for two years, playing guitar and singing. If I took sick, I wasn't able to earn my living or feed myself. It was really frightening at that age. I went from having a house with parents who did everything for me to suddenly having to work if I wanted to eat. I was lucky enough to get one of the last grants and ended up going to school to study acting.

An agent of mine, who will remain nameless, said you can't make a romance about homeless people because nobody wants to see them kiss. I was so shocked by the awfulness of the statement. What I heard was how they were thinking of these people as something other. That was what I wanted to discuss and examine: To present two people who on paper are unforgivable, then make you love them because people are lovable when you get to know their stories.

Courtesy of INSP News Service www.INSP.ngo/ / The Big Issue

'Shelter'

Director and writer: Paul Bettany

Starring: Jennifer Connelly (Bettany's wife) and Anthony Mackie

On Blu-ray and DVD Jan. 11