

Interview: Building a Character With John C. Reilly of 'Cyrus'

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CHICAGO – John C. Reilly, the star of “Chicago,” “Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby,” “Step Brothers,” and “Magnolia” gives one of the best performances of his career in this weekend’s excellent “Cyrus” and the actor sat down with HollywoodChicago.com a few weeks ago to discuss the process behind this unusual film.

In the film by Mark and Jay Duplass (“The Puffy Chair,” “Baghead”), Reilly stars as John, a lonely man stunned when the gorgeous Molly (Marisa Tomei) takes a liking to him at a party. As the tagline for the film succinctly says, “John met the woman of his dreams. Then he met her son...”

Her son Cyrus is brilliantly played by Jonah Hill in the best performance of his career. The star of “Superbad” takes an unusual man-child and deftly walks the line between traditional comedy and something a little more dangerous. Is Cyrus emotionally stunted or straight-up crazy?

The Duplass brothers not only wrote “Cyrus” for John C. Reilly but told him that they wouldn’t even do the film unless he agreed. Reilly embraced the vision of these unique directors who work without a net, almost completely improvisational.



Cyrus

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

“They wrote a script but we didn’t do the dialogue from the script,” says Reilly. “Every day they’d be like ‘Here’s what happens in the scene but how we get to that is up to you guys. If it feels phony don’t do it.’ There’s dialogue and scenes written out but we just didn’t do THOSE lines. We would operate from a much more general place in terms of what we wanted to accomplish in the scenes. ‘You can’t find your shoes and you’re trying to angle to go with them on their date. Discuss.’”



Cyrus

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

The Duplass brothers are clearly a bit different from normal directors, but Reilly is quick to point out, “The truth is that all directors are different. The technique of making film, the overall structure, is pretty much the same but everyone is really different. That’s one of the fascinating thing about being an actor – you’re sort of a double agent. Directors don’t spend a lot of time on other people’s sets so they don’t actually know...Altman didn’t know how Scorsese did it and Scorsese doesn’t know how the Duplass brothers do it...but I’m the person who’s been there in the trenches with all these people. I see how they’re different and how they’re the same.”

“These guys have a very low budget, do-it-yourself attitude even though this movie has a much bigger budget than they’ve ever had. They really stuck to their guns about how they wanted the movie to look. They did almost the whole thing handheld despite the studio demanding that they not do that. And then they would do things like film for a half hour straight and Jay and Mark would walk off and talk about what just happened...and that’s unusual in itself – to have another person to bounce stuff off of, a directing team. They’ve got a real commitment to the truth and emotional reality. They’ve seen a lot of movies and they know when something rings false and they’re just not going to do that.”



Cyrus

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

Reilly came out of the improv world of Chicago and embraced the chance to do something more unique than standard comedy with those skills. “I wanted to do more than just ‘be funny’ with improv. I wanted to do more dramatic things. This movie was a great chance to do that.”

The unique style of the filmmakers stood out for Reilly, who says, “Now that I’ve done fifty movies, you got to have a reason to get excited about something and now what gets me excited are people who are really inspired and have a really strong point of view. I’m less interested in sort of helping people figure out what they want to do. At this point I want to go in with people who have a really clear idea. Mark and Jay definitely have a point of view. How we got to it was kind of left up to me which is really cool.”

The film shot in under a month, making instant chemistry a requirement to be believable. To play the role of his ex-wife, a partnership that the audience needs to believe has been through a lot over the years, Reilly turned to an old friend in the great Catherine Keener. He says, “I knew that within this tight schedule – we shot the movie in a month – that there wouldn’t be a lot of time for getting to know a new person. I’m glad that comes across in the movie.”



One of the main reason’s for the film’s artistic success is the interplay between Reilly and Hill. The elder star has only high praise for his screen-mate — “Jonah’s a really smart, very funny, very facile – he has a really quick mind. Most of that energy has been harnessed for jokes and to riff on funny things but he’s also a really honest actor even when he’s doing comedy or more broad stuff. He’s not someone who’ll just do some cheesy line because he’s told to. He has a real integrity. It’s really cool in this movie how he used that ability to improvise and play to really flesh out this character. I think he really enjoyed being able to not have to pump out a laugh every 30 seconds. We just enjoyed being these people and creating the reality of this world without the superobjective of it having to be funny all the time.”

With such a diverse resume and acclaimed filmography, it may be somewhat surprising to learn that Reilly claims to be most recognized for “Step Brothers” — “There’s a wide range of people that are into that movie. Little kids and I’m like ‘Really?!?! You saw Step Brothers?!? Really?’”

“They just want to say hi and thanks. That’s the cool thing about doing comedy – you bring joy to people and they really appreciate it when they see you. It’s just a lot of love.”

Love John C. Reilly even more when “Cyrus” opens in Chicago tomorrow, June 25th, 2010.



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