

Interview: Katie Aselton Makes Her Directorial Debut With 'The Freebie'

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CHICAGO – Few couples have made as indelible an impression on the modern independent film scene as Mark Duplass and Katie Aselton. Best known for their breakout work in 2005's "The Puffy Chair," the two actors-turned-filmmakers have forged a variety of collaborations, most recently in the FX sitcom, "The League."

Yet while Mark has written and directed a series of films with his brother Jay, "The Freebie" marks Aselton's feature filmmaking debut. Co-produced by her husband, this romantic dramedy tells the tale of Annie (Aselton) and Darren (Dax Shepard), whose unbridled level of honesty runs the risk of snuffing out their spark. With their sex life at a standstill, the couple hatches a plan. They agree to each find a one night stand that will hopefully reignite their physical passion for one another. Unfortunately, the 'freebie' proves to have a major price. Hollywood Chicago chatted with Aselton about her chemistry with Shepard, her relief in the editing room, and her decision to shoot the film without a script.

HollywoodChicago.com: What first inspired you to venture into directing?

Katie Aselton: I wanted a job. I'm primarily an actor and I love what I do, but I wasn't getting the opportunities [I wanted]. So being married to Mark, I didn't really have a good excuse to not go and make my own film.

HollywoodChicago.com: Has your husband's work influenced your approach to filmmaking?

Aselton: Getting to watch Mark and Jay, specifically, you see how simple it can be. I don't mean easy but simple. It's really just about capturing a truthful moment. It's not about the bells and the whistles and how many lights you need and how many people you need on a set. It's really about telling a story and capturing an honest moment. When [Mark and Jay] work with actors, everything is a conversation and a discussion. It's a lovely creative experience, and getting to watch them makes you realize that if you're willing to be as open as they are, and you have a story that you feel you have an original way of telling, then it's not impossible.



Katie Aselton stars in her directorial debut, The Freebie.

Photo credit: Phase 4 Films

HollywoodChicago.com: Is it true you made "Freebie" with a rough outline rather than a script?

Aselton: Yeah, I had a six page outline. Mark and Jay work from a fully fleshed out script and they allow for improv when the scene calls for it. For me, I'm sort of a step back from where they are. Mark is a beautiful writer, and he and Jay collaborate really well on scripts. I've never written a thing in my life. What I have here is a story that I could see from start to finish and I could see the way it would unfold. But then coming to the project as an actor, I really wanted to have a very "Cassavetes-like," collaborative, creative environment where things were fresh and new. And if the only thing that we got out of those 11 days of shooting was a great acting experience, that would've been a wonderful thing for me. The fact that we came out of it with that experience and then have a movie to show for it is sort of beyond my expectations. It was supposed to be a 14-day shooting period, but we shot with another actor and it wasn't really working. We lost a couple days there. Dax came on day 4, and he just gelled right in. He thought he was signing on to be the bartender [played in the film by Ross Partridge], which is hilarious to me. I was like, "Dax, did you really think we were going to shoot that scene for 11 days?"

HollywoodChicago.com: In the audio commentary, you said that you contacted Dax about the role 18 hours prior to his first take. How were you able to develop such instantaneous chemistry with him?

Aselton: This is just a theory because I haven't had as much experience as I would like to have in this sort of realm, but I think when someone walks onset and is emotionally open and available and willing and excited to be a part of something, it [becomes] very easy. Dax came in and he had no walls up. He was just there, he was very present and he made it easy. He's lovely and on top of that, he's talented, so to find that sort of chemistry with him, it was not a struggle. He's also very easy on the eyes.

HollywoodChicago.com: The role of Darren unearths a startlingly dramatic side of Dax, much like how "Cyrus" allowed Jonah to explore a character markedly different from his usual comic persona.

Aselton: Exactly. I feel like in a lot of ways, both Jonah and Dax have gotten the short end of the stick when people are like, "Who knew they could do this?" On the other hand, who's asked them to do this? Of course they can do different [roles]. These guys are tremendously talented. They've just never been asked to do something like this. So it's exciting for Mark and Jay and for me to feel like we gave them that opportunity, and they took it and ran with it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Had you known Dax beforehand?

Aselton: Mark knew him. He had taken a meeting with him like a year before "The Freebie" and he just immediately loved him. They played ping pong a couple times. But I had never met him and it wasn't like they were particularly close. They only had hung out about two or three times. So I met him the day we started shooting with him. He came out to the house for a wardrobe fitting and I was like, "Hi, it's very nice to meet you, would you like to make out later?"



Katie Aselton and Dax Shepard star in Aselton's *The Freebie*.

Photo credit: Phase 4 Films

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you ultimately feel the film is about?

Aselton: It's about this couple who pat themselves on the back for being so tremendously honest, but avoid talking about the one thing they really should be talking about, which is the fact they have an incredible level of intimacy that's not physical. It's not about the end of a marriage. I really believe that in long term, committed relationships, it's very easy to fall into routines that don't involve sex because life gets in the way sometimes. That doesn't mean that you don't love each other, and that doesn't mean that you've lost attraction. It just means that your routines have changed. But I think a lot of times if you address that issue, it feels like an attack on one's ego and identity. Sex is so heavy when you start talking about it that people don't talk about it. The more they don't talk about it, the more it becomes a much bigger monster.

HollywoodChicago.com: On the commentary, you joke that "Freebie" is an unofficial sequel to "Puffy Chair." What similarities do you note between the two films?

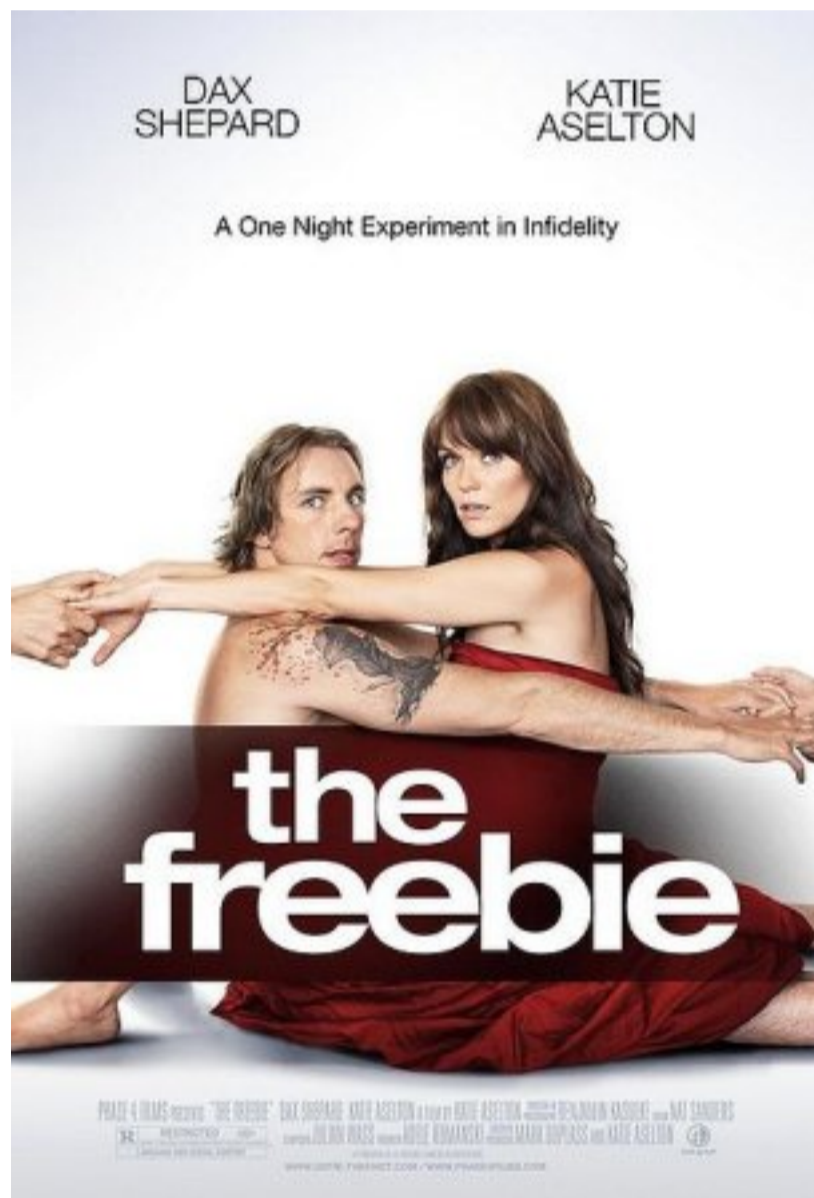
Aselton: I think it's just the fact that they're both [about] couples with problems. They put their blinders on and choose to not look at the problems that really do exist. They believe that they can just power through.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the experience like of working on such a tight shooting schedule?

Aselton: What's so strange is that we never really felt rushed. If you look, we have a 78-minute movie. It's a very short movie, and it's a very simple story. There's not a ton of locations, and we actually had a very relaxed shooting schedule. We didn't have a day off in there but at the same time, when we finished, we all felt like we could keep going.

HollywoodChicago.com: Dax admits in the commentary that he was unsure about whether he had made a complete film after production wrapped.

Aselton: Yeah it was strange, and I felt the same way. I really thought I was going to come out of this and go, "That was so fun. It's a bummer that it didn't work, but god that was really amazing" [laughs]. And then sitting with Nat Sanders in the editing room, he brings us a rough cut, and I'm like, "Holy s—t, that's kind of a movie, and I kind of like it." So we played with the footage more and more, and everything after that was just a pleasant surprise. The key is that you really have to like those characters to sit and listen to them talk for so long, and that was always our biggest challenge, but Nat has this amazing way of making those scenes work.



The Freebie was released on DVD on Jan. 11, 2011.

Photo credit: Phase 4 Films

HollywoodChicago.com: Had you always planned to have the plot flip back upon itself?

Aselton: Initially, my outline was less linear. I liked the idea of examining this couple before and after, just watching the effect that one night can have on a relationship. But that gets very confusing when you're only going over the scope of five days. "Blue Valentine" can do it because they're going over five years.

HollywoodChicago.com: There's quite a bit of buzz surrounding your upcoming projects: the Duplass Brothers' "Jeff Who Lives at Home" and Sean Nelson's "Treatment."

Aselton: I'm super-excited for "Jeff Who Lives at Home." I think that's going to be a beautiful film, and Mark and Jay just keep getting better and better at what they do. I have another movie that's coming out on DVD right now called "Feed the Fish," which is my very first venture into family friendly films. It's my first film that kids can see, which is really thrilling. It takes place in Wisconsin and it's a really sweet film starring Tony Shalhoub and Barry Corbin, and ironically enough, Ross Partridge. So that's really exciting to jump into a different genre. As for "Treatment," I think they're still working on it. I haven't seen a recent cut of it, but I absolutely adore Sean Nelson. I hope there's going to be another season of "The League," fingers crossed, baited breath.

'The Freebie' stars Katie Aselton, Dax Shepard, Ross Partridge, Frankie Shaw, Sean Nelson and Joshua Leonard. It was directed by Katie

Aselton. It was released on DVD on Jan. 11th, 2011. It is rated R.



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