

Interview: Director Richard J. Lewis on His Side of ‘Barney’s Version’

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CHICAGO – Working with high level actors such as Paul Giamatti and Dustin Hoffman didn’t faze director Richard J. Lewis. He had pursued the film version of the Mordecai Richler’s novel “Barney’s Version” for several years, and it was his direction that recently got Giamatti (as Barney) the Golden Globe Award.

Lewis is a veteran of television, serving as a producer on the seminal police drama “CSI: Crime Scene Investigation” from 2002 to 2009. Before that, he directed several shows, including “Due South,” Showtime’s “Beggars and Choosers” and most recently “The Defenders.” He scored a notable feature debut with “Whale Music” [1994] and even directed “K-9:PI” [2002] starring Jim Belushi.



Director Richard J. Lewis on the set of ‘Barney’s Version’
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classic

Richard J. Lewis sat down for a lively Q&A with HollywoodChicago.com when he was in Chicago this week promoting Barney’s Version.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’re a notable television producer and director who has made his second feature film. What was the process regarding getting the opportunity to do ‘Barney’s Version’?

Richard J. Lewis: Robert Lantos, the guy who produced my first feature, Whale Music, owned the rights to Barney’s Version. I hounded him for years about directing it. Eventually I adapted the Mordecai Richler novel on spec as a screenplay while I was doing CSI. After seven or eight months I gave it to Lantos, and he signed a writing/directing deal with me. There were problems he wanted to solve in the screenplay, so we brought in another writer [Michael Konyves] who basically turned it topsy-turvy. I was quite nervous about that, but when I read the screenplay I found that we had done the right thing, because we found a way to tell the story that was more direct, more cinematic and less attached to the book itself.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was your interpretation of the Barney character and did it ever clash with Paul Giamatti's portrayal?

Lewis: The answer to the second part of the question is 'no,' Paul and I were in a symbiotic relationship in regard to the character. And I find that the best thing I can do as a director with a character study piece like this, is to be in the shoes of that character. To really feel that character on an everyday basis. When I go to work with Paul Giamatti, I also go there as Barney. I try to relate to everything from his point of view, to what the character is feeling and how the actor is feeling about the character in every single moment that may occur. If I can do that, I've done my job.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since this was set in Canada, what touches or feeling did you want to give it as a Canadian-based film?

Lewis: I don't think it is particularly Canadian. When I think those types of films, I think hockey, ice and snow, a more small town feel. To me, this is a cultural movie, it has just as much to do with it being a Jewish movie as it does Canadian. It's definitely a slice-of-life that we haven't seen, which is Jewish Montreal, and that's provided with beauty and ample richness by the novelist Mordecai Richler. Hopefully, people understand a part of Canada they haven't seen before. That's the nice part I'm really proud of.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is also several eras at work in the film. Who on the set was responsible for making sure the 1970s were represented correctly, or were you merely going for an impression than complete accuracy?

Lewis: I don't think it's meant to be an impression, I think it's meant to land us securely in the 1970s. We had a production designer named Claude Paré, who was so attentive to detail. I had photos that I would continuously post in my office with the different periods – like the '70s – and the hairdos, wardrobe and music fed into it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Barney Panofsky is rarely shown to be a mensch. In structuring the story, what was the decision to showcase mostly his obnoxious and unappealing side, rather than the softness that those around him seem to feel?

Lewis: It's us winning the the audience over, getting them from one place to another place, seeing that transition as somewhat satisfying. And on the other hand, getting away from a man and character that we've seen in other films who are less dimensional and are just one action or one thing. I wanted, and so did Richler, to create a man that was an accumulation of his various acts and choices – his good, bad and ugly. And that's what makes him human. Once we understand that he is human, we like him.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your opinion, what statement do Barney's three wives make in regards to women and the choices they make regarding men?

Lewis: Well, they all make the same choice, don't they? And why do they choose Barney. Let's go back to the beginning with his first wife, he was a father figure to her, he offered stability to Clara's wacky, crazy bohemian life. She needed that at the time, since she was freaking out at all turns.

He persistent, charming, smart and funny, but mostly he speaks his mind. I think women like that, men who are what they say they are. Miriam [his third wife] loves him because he shows so much devotion and boldness in going after her, and she believes that he truly loves her. When you spin words like he did during their first meeting, 'you know this really happens, and I don't care where it happens...' she feels that, she feels it in her bones, even though she is a woman of propriety and won't let it seep in just yet, she does take it with her.



Paul Giamatti as Barney and Dustin Hoffman as Izzy in 'Barney's Version'
Photo credit: Takashi Seida for Sony Pictures Classic

HollywoodChicago.com: Judaism and Anti Semitic themes were prevalent throughout the film. As you interpreted it, Barney's religion part of his burden or his pride and why?

Lewis: I think it's definitely his pride, but I wouldn't call it religion in this case. I think it's secular, both Izzy [Dustin Hoffman] and Barney are secular Jews. I would call it his culture, not his religion. I think he's the kind of Jew that if you called him an anti-Semitic name, he'd punch you in the nose, but he wouldn't take the time to get into a religious debate. The Jews in this story have assimilated, and that is Izzy's story. He became a cop on the Montreal police force, which is quite dynamic. It was necessary to drop the religious aspects of being a Jew outwardly and become secular. Richler was not a religious man, and these characters stem from him.

HollywoodChicago.com: Dustin Hoffman is notorious for his obsession in creating a character. Did you have any clashes with him regard the portrayal of Izzy Panofsky?

Lewis: No, I had no clashes with Dustin, we actually worked together really well. He was very humble and inquisitive, and was able to find the character in a way that was wonderful. I loved working with him. He was 100% encouraging to me.

HollywoodChicago.com: Regarding your TV career, as a major gatekeeper of the original CSI series, what do you think sets it apart both from its spin-offs and many imitators?

Lewis: It's like when you eat really good sushi, it's hard to find it, but when you do its the only thing you'll go back for. [laughs] It always separates itself from the crappy stuff that surrounds it. I think that our focus as we made it was deeper and had a better aesthetic, and better acting. There was always a maturity with our show that didn't translate to the other shows, especially Miami.

I think it mostly had to do with the ensemble we put together. William Petersen and Marg Helgenberger, they are such fine actors, along with Jorja Fox, George Eads and Gary Dourdan in the original. These were actors who had a beautiful chemistry together, and the writing was very interesting, and it's hard to write that kind of show. It's always also good to be the first and not the copycat.

HollywoodChicago.com: Just to give a showbiz process story, what were the circumstances of your directing the third K-9 movie?

Lewis: It's very simple. I was one of the core directors on a show called 'Beggars and Choosers' on Showtime, and on that show in the last season they brought in Jim Belushi. And Jim Belushi personally hired me to direct the K-9 Three movie. That's exactly how it worked. I recently worked with him on his new show 'The Defenders.'

HollywoodChicago.com: In regard to your filmmaker influences, are there any tiny tributes to directors you like that you've put into any of your many projects?

Lewis: It's not just one. I'll put a camera in a certain place and it will remind me of a certain director. Often, depending on the genre, I will find myself cinematically thinking about language that came from the great Western directors like John Ford or Sergio Leone.

With Barney's Version, I give a 'hats-off' to the great Technicolor films made in the 1960s and '70s. A lot of it has to do with the production design and the lighting design. If you look at the film, you can see "Goodbye Columbus" in it, even "The Graduate." There is a lot in it with that kind of feel.

"Barney's Version" continues a limited release in Chicago on January 21st, check local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Paul Giamatti, Dustin Hoffman, Minnie Driver, Rosamund Pike and Scott Speedman. Screenplay by Michael Konyves, directed by Richard J. Lewis Rated "R"



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