

Interview: Ed Helms of 'Cedar Rapids,' 'The Office' Talks Character

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on February 10, 2011 - 3:43pm

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CHICAGO – Ed Helms is one hot rising star. After a breakthrough in “The Hangover” in 2009, he continues his climb with the excellent “Cedar Rapids,” co-starring John C. Reilly. All this while playing the affable Andy on TV’s “The Office.”

Helms began his career as a sketch writer in New York City, studying improvisation through the Chicago-originated Uptight Citizens Brigade. After performing stand-up in 2002, he got an opportunity to audition for “The Daily Show,” and was featured there as a field correspondent until 2006. At that time he joined cast of “The Office” as Andy Bernard, the perplexed and lovelorn sales rep.

His notoriety continued in 2009 when he played the tooth-losing dentist Stu Price in the mega-hit “The Hangover,” and has just wrapped “The Hangover, Part II,” due to release this year during Memorial Day weekend.



Ready for His Close-Up: Ed Helms on the set of 'Cedar Rapids'
Photo credit: Zach Rosenthal for © Twentieth Century Fox

Helms was in Chicago this week to promote Cedar Rapids, in which he portrays Tim Lippe, an innocent insurance salesman from a small town who is asked to represent his branch at the big convention in (naturally) Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He plays Tim as a complete and empathetic character, and talked about the overall production experience with HollywoodChicago.

HollywoodChicago.com: You play an Midwestern 'everyman' in Cedar Rapids, and much like Jimmy Stewart in 'Mr. Smith Goes to Washington' you're traveling to a distant land in order to both influence your colleagues and learn about yourself. What archetype or person in your life helped you to formulate the Tim Lippe character?

Ed Helms: Well you just spoke to the archetype. I have an issue with the question as I don't think Tim Lippe is an 'everyman.' He's a very rare and weird stunted man that not a lot of us can really relate to, especially in terms of his strange childhood, and how he lost his parents.

HollywoodChicago.com: I guess I was speaking more to the ordinary nature of his occupation...

Helms: Yes, and I think the story of Mr. Smith Goes to Washington is the classic country mouse goes to the city, and this film is that, but on an incredibly scaled down scope. We all are familiar with that archetype, but I think Tim Lippe is just someone who resonated with me as an intrinsically good person, who wants to do well but makes horrible decisions along the way.

HollywoodChicago.com: I see traces of Andy from The Office in Tim Lippe. What do you think are the fundamental differences between the characters, and the similarities?

Helms: The similarities are certainly that they look exactly alike. They also have a strikingly similar timber in their voice. [laughs] They dress differently, but they do have a singular wardrobe. To the extent that they overlap is that they are just good guys. They both want to do what is right, and they struggle with that.

But that is about where it stops. They get in their own way in different ways. Andy puts it out there all time, he's very much a showman with a bombastic energy and he's in your face a lot. If he's angry, you sure as hell know it, and if he's in love, you sure as hell know it as well. He's just constantly emoting and putting things out there.

Tim is a very closed book. You get the feeling that there are some weird, dark passages in that book if you were ever to flip through it. That he may have had some disturbing things in his youth, for example. As a result, he's quiet and all of his actions are guided by fear, fear of the unknown. And he knows so little that the 'unknown' is a large percentage of the world. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Sex is an underlying theme in Cedar Rapids, with the women actually directing that force more than the men. Do you think the approach of sexuality in a man like Tim Lippe is more prominent in American culture than a 'love 'em and leave 'em' stud?

Helms: I think a lot of men, myself included, fantasize about being the 'love 'em and leave 'em' stud. It's an image we idealize, and it's frustrating when we see women attracted to that. Because it's like 'what about me over here, I will...make you breakfast.' [laughs] You've hit on something because it is all fantasy, there are very few people who pull that off for real. Reality is much more complicated than that, you really can't engage in actions like that, our actions do have repercussions. If you are responsible person you can't behave like that for very long without some sort of backlash, be it emotion or physical.



Two of Us: Anne Heche as Joan and Ed Helms as Tim in 'Cedar Rapids'
Photo credit: Zach Rosenthal for © Twentieth Century Fox

HollywoodChicago.com: The innocent Tim Lippe has to make several decisions in the story that run counter to the type of person that he is. Have you ever had to make a similar decision or decisions, and how did it turn out?

Helms: [Long pause] I've never challenged my values, I've got great values and I stick by them all the time. [laughs] There are a number of those situations that I will keep between me and my conscience.

HollywoodChicago.com: You were the prime move for getting Phil Johnson's script of Cedar Rapids to the marketplace. What was the process of gathering the producer, director and that fine cast?

Helms: It's a fairly conventional biography of an independent film. Phil and I connected early on when he had the idea for the film, and we clicked with one another in exploring the characters and the world. He went off and wrote this incredible script, and we began shopping it around to producers. And we thought a total longshot, and wouldn't it be insane, if Alexander Payne ['Sideways,' 'About Schmidt'] would do it. Sure enough, he snatched it right up. Once he was on board, we started talking to directors.

That process was interesting, because a lot of the director candidates saw it as a broad, mean-spirited comedy, and a potential to make fun of the characters. This was so counter to the film we wanted to make, so when Miguel [Arteta] came along and said 'I love this world, and I love these characters,' it was instantly clear that he understood how much we also loved these characters and wanted to celebrate them. Fox Searchlight was the next step, and they also understood it immediately, it was just a great, steadily growing team of like-minded people.

HollywoodChicago.com: You are a singer and musician. How do you think your love of music influence the characters of Andy on the Office and Tim's big moment in Cedar Rapids?

Helms: My love of music is a huge part of Andy on The Office, which we play up as a very annoying personality trait, which gives me a great deal of satisfaction. I think music, when it is too loud, in the wrong context or at the wrong time can be some of the most hysterical stuff out there. There is nothing funnier than a Broadway show tune breaking out in the exact wrong situation.



Smile! Ed Helms in Chicago, February 9th, 2011
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you develop that in your act as you were going through the paces?

Helms: Somewhat. It's always something I enjoyed. There were pieces of it in 'The Daily Show.' I remember going out to do pieces and coming back, and the segment producer would say, 'f*cking Helms sang again!' [laughs]

With Tim Lippe it wasn't in the forefront, it was just a nice way to very quickly show how Tim was effecting everyone. That comes from the part that's not condescending to him or the Midwest in general. Alexander Payne was very vocal about that. It would have been a lot easier to make him a terrible singer or make a big joke about it. But why bother, because it's more interesting and real to have someone really care about a song like that.

Alexander is a master at holding a mirror to himself, as a Midwesterner, and finding what's is actually flawed or funny, without being insulting. It was a real godsend to have him on board this film.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did your early stand-up and improvisation help you to create the 'character' you played in the years on The Daily Show? Did you come in with that character or did it evolve?

Helms: It was both. I was a huge fan of the show at the time I auditioned and I've done a lot of homework, and I thought I knew what I had to do. It was good enough to get me the job but what I learned very quickly is that I didn't have a f*cking clue as to what I was doing. [laughs] It's a tribute to Jon Stewart and the staff of that show that they gave me room to breathe and find my voice. It took a long time and was a bit tricky.

HollywoodChicago.com: Now that you have Sigourney Weaver, Anne Heche and Heather Graham as fictional conquests, who will you be

schtupping in ‘The Hangover, Part II’?

Helms: [Laughs] I can’t wait for you to find out.

“Cedar Rapids” has a limited release in Chicago on February 11th. See local listings for theaters and showtimes. Featuring Ed Helms, John C. Reilly, Anne Heche, Isiah Whitlock, Jr., Sigourney Weaver, Alia Shawkat and Kurtwood Smith. Screenplay by Phil Johnson, directed by Miquel Arteta. Rated “R”



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