

Interview: Director Miguel Arteta Maps a Route to ‘Cedar Rapids’

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CHICAGO – It takes a man born in Puerto Rico to really understand the Midwest, and director Miguel Arteta proves it in his stellar “Cedar Rapids.” Given an all-star cast including Ed Helms, Anne Heche, Sigourney Weaver and John C. Reilly, Arteta formulates a comedy that feels like the heartland.

Arteta spent his youth moving around Latin America because of his father’s job with Chrysler. After moving to Boston to live with his sister, he learned filmmaking from Harvard University’s documentary program and Wesleyan University, where he met future collaborator Mike White.

His first film, “Star Maps” (1997), was a hit at the Sundance Film Festival, and led him into television directing. Two other films, the Mike White penned “Chuck and Buck” (2001) and “The Good Girl” (2002) both were memorable stories and featured appearances by White, Jake Gyllenhaal, Jennifer Aniston and John C. Reilly. He came back last year with Michael Cera directing “Youth in Revolt.”



Masterminds: Producer Alexander Payne and Director Miguel Arteta of ‘Cedar Rapids’
Photo credit: Zach Rosenthal for © Twentieth Century Fox

Cedar Rapids is a perfect vehicle for Arteta, who has displayed a particular talent in his films for emphasizing the lives of seemingly ordinary people. This time he collaborates with Ed Helms (“The Office”), who plays a small-town insurance salesman called upon to represent his branch office at an association gathering in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Arteta sat down for an interview with HollywoodChicago.com in anticipation of the film’s limited release on February 11th.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your career you have seemed drawn to the small heroism of the common man. What fascinates you about everyday people, and how is the best way to make them seem heroic?

Miguel Arteta: I think what fascinates me that everyone has emotional damage, we all do. It seems like a god given right for parents to screw up their children. [laughs] I like finding the compassion in that dilemma that we all have. We all come into our lives with a lot of emotional handicaps and that's what interests me about making movies, how do we find our way out of that?

HollywoodChicago.com: Cedar Rapids strikes me as Frank Capra-esque, the innocent rube influencing the actions around him until he himself is called upon to directly change the circumstance. What is your favorite Frank Capra film and has he influenced as a filmmaker?

Arteta: I'm glad you said that in a big way. I love him. My teacher Jeanine Basinger [film historian at Wesleyan University] was personal friends with him and holds his archives. I really like 'Mr Smith Goes to Washington.' It may not be his best film, but I love it. And it influenced Cedar Rapids, about someone so innocent, such a rube, but his spirit becomes contagious to the most jaded of people.

Ed Helms has a Jack Lemmon and Jimmy Stewart quality to him, and because of the tough times out there I wanted to make a sweet comedy. There is foul language and sex in it, but it's all handled with a notable compassion.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the origin with your involvement in bringing Phil Johnson's script to the screen?

Arteta: Phil found Ed first, before 'The Hangover' came out. Phil had the idea and through a friend of a friend brought it to Ed. Ed and he developed it together, there was a lot of love put in before I came in. They brought in the 'King of Midwestern Comedies,' Alexander Payne, to produce. And then they went to find a director. At that point it was obvious that they needed a Puerto Rican born director to make there love letter to the Midwest come to life. [laughs]



Stanwyckian: Anne Heche and Ed Helms of 'Cedar Rapids'
Photo credit: Zach Rosenthal for © Twentieth Century Fox

HollywoodChicago.com: The cast in Cedar Rapids is working at a very high level and seem to understand brilliantly how their characters relate. What was the process to getting these connections so right?

Arteta: It was all about chemistry, it is the 'Wizard of Oz' of insurance. Rolling the casting dice was the most difficult challenge, you just hope it turns out right. You have to use your hunch, not your brain, when you're casting. Your brain and words are your enemy. You can talk until you're blue in the face why somebody is right or wrong, it just has to be from your gut.

My hunch is that we needed different character types to get them to be good friends. Anne Heche is electric, she's like a satellite spinning around people. She would make Ed Helm's character uncomfortable, which would be great.

For John C. Reilly, when I was thinking about his character Dean Ziegler, there is a point where he calls his wife an asshole. I thought, who could do that and still get across that it comes from bitterness and pain, not just all anger. And I thought about John. John is a national treasure, he can do both comedy and drama. He really latched on to the fact that this party animal needed to party because he was going through such a bitter divorce.

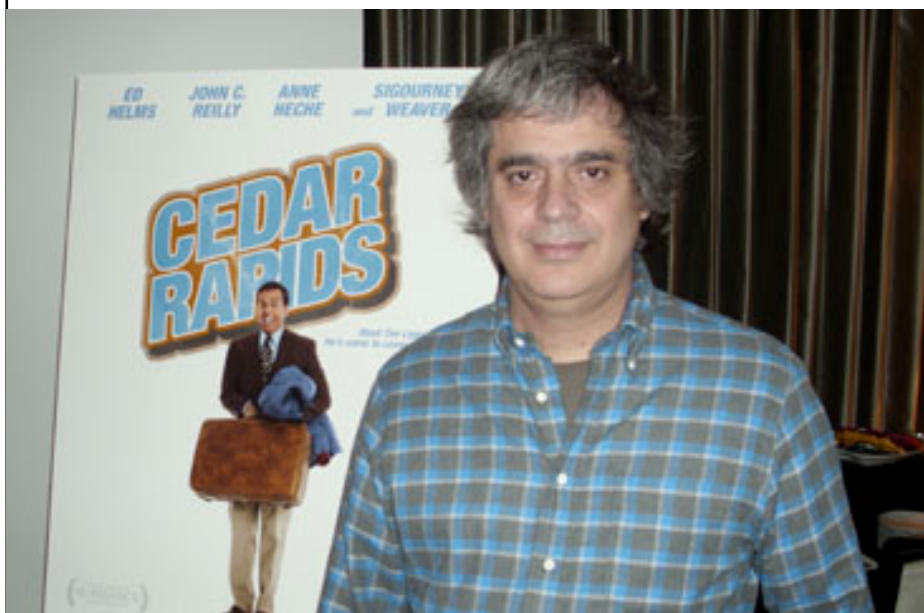
Finally we saw more than 60 guys for Ronald Wilkes. Isiah Whitlock Jr. comes from the Midwest. He said all of his life he's been dying to find a project where he could show his affection for the Midwest. He was a big key to making the chemistry work.

HollywoodChicago.com: The sex in Cedar Rapids is for the most part controlled and established by the women in the film. In your opinion, is Tim Lippe a symbol for American men's cultural attitude towards sex, is he in effect more in the norm than a man portrayed as a stud?

Arteta: Well, certainly Ed Helms is a cultural symbol for sex in this country. [laughs] For me, sex is very complicated and it's always irrational. The cultural norms of the typical male role doesn't apply anymore, at least not in my experience with the women I know. In this film, Tim is looking more for a mother than a sex partner. Sometimes women are willing to go that way. It's not like the fighting caveman anymore that wins the prize.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've observed the United States culture and the American Dream from the outside, after growing up in Latin America. What makes you laugh about the U.S. in thinking about the differences between us and our Southern American neighbors, and what has been the most interesting element of the United States that continues to fascinate you?

Arteta: The way the U.S. wraps fruit. [laughs] It doesn't happen that way in Latin America. When I landed at the Miami Airport when I was 16 years old I saw a mango on a styrofoam tray all wrapped up I remember thinking, 'I may be successful in this country because people doing this don't have a clue.' [laughs] I'm still fascinated by that.



Director Miguel Arteta in Chicago, February 9th, 2011
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: You've directed two very notable films with Mike White. In 'Chuck and Buck,' how common do you think is the situation between those two men, and what do you think the best way a heterosexual man can come to terms with that side of himself?

Arteta: I think it's more common than one thinks, given the lasting popularity of the film. It is really satisfying to have made a film ten years ago that people really think about. Mike tapped upon something primal, and the boundaries between being straight and being gay are really starting to be blurred. People are more like on a scale, as in 'I'm me.' It's comforting, because I think everyone has a mix of instincts that make them who they are.

HollywoodChicago.com: You got one the best film performances from Jennifer Aniston in 'The Good Girl.' Since this was made during the height of her 'Friends' image, how did you, her and Mike White create such a distinctive and different character for her to with in that film?

Arteta: Lucky timing. She was in a place in her life where emotionally she was willing to explore a darker side of herself. She said to me very candidly at that time that she was a product of a divorce, and it was always her job to make everyone happy by making them laugh. And she said it served her very well, and very well financially. But after several years of doing that successful show she told me she was ready to explore the pain and sadness that is the flip side of comic actors. She was at the right place and the right time.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was also extraordinary was that you and her were able to take out her very glamorous image to create the character.

Arteta: It was that pair of jeans that did, they were very unflattering. [laughs] She's awesome, a hard worker and the loveliest person. I would love to work with her again, to get deeper than these comedies she is doing lately.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your evolution as a filmmaker, what was the best thing about getting bigger stars and better budgets in realizing your vision as a filmmaker?

Arteta: That is easy, getting more time. Time is the enemy of the filmmaker. You spend years dreaming up your story, and all of a sudden it's very expensive to get a crew together, so do it now and let's get moving. You've got three takes, let's go. I had 40 days to film Cedar Rapids, which for an independent filmmaker is a great luxury. We were able to do something I haven't ever been able to do. Start a scene, and if something didn't feel right, stop it. Discuss, and start again.

HollywoodChicago.com: How much improvisation was going on during the production?

Arteta: A lot. I ran a loose set. When you have John C. Reilly, Ed Helms and Anne Heche, it would be foolish to waste that talent. What was interesting is that some of the improv lines weren't necessarily funny lines. There were just lines of dialogue, true moments. It was a pretty open environment. And even though it was Ed's project from the beginning, he was very generous in allowing everyone to say what made them comfortable. I think that's why the chemistry between those four characters is so good.

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you ever place an homage to a favorite director of yours in a film, like a shot or a scene set-up?

Arteta: Definitely. I'm a film geek. There is a tribute to Barbara Stanwyck in Cedar Rapids, when Ed and Anne are in the pool and she looks

at him before she seduces him, where she locks eyes with him. There is a moment in the film ‘Double Indemnity’ when Stanwyck does the same look on Fred MacMurray, when they’re in the store and cannot speak. It’s so sexy because it’s uninterrupted eye contact.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you tell Heche you were doing that?

Arteta: No, I told her if that two human beings lock eyes for more than eight seconds and don’t move, they’re either going to kill each other or have sex, so that might be a good seduction technique. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Has your approach to directing changed from ‘Star Maps’ to ‘Cedar Rapids’?

Arteta: I have more faith. It’s takes an enormous amount of faith to make a movie, and if the hairs on the back of my neck are tingling in the right way while we’re shooting, there must be something in that can of film that will be okay.

“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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