

Interview: Seth Rogen, Will Reiser Bet on Cancer Comedy '50/50'

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- [50/50](#) [2]
- [Anjelica Huston](#) [3]
- [Anna Kendrick](#) [4]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [5]
- [Bryce Dallas Howard](#) [6]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [7]
- [Interview](#) [8]
- [Jonathan Levine](#) [9]
- [Joseph Gordon-Levitt](#) [10]
- [Seth Rogen](#) [11]
- [Will Reiser](#) [12]

CHICAGO – “A cancer comedy”. It had to be a tough sell. How do you sell a buddy movie in which one of them is probably going to die from the big C? It was a risky proposition. And yet the chorus of acclaim for “50/50” proves that Seth Rogen was right to convince his buddy Will Reiser to turn his true story into a fictional comedy. We’ll be back with a review of the excellent film on Friday, but we sat down with Rogen & Reiser, along with the great Locke Peterseim of [Redbox](#) [13], to talk about how the film came to be, how it diverges from reality, and how much Joseph Gordon-Levitt totally rules.

Redbox.com: What do you say [at Q&A introductions] for this movie, how do you set people up?

SETH ROGEN: We introduced it at UCLA so I just made a bunch of weed jokes ‘cause that’s what the 18 year olds wanted to hear. I pander to my crowd, I’ll be honest.

WILL REISER: I mean, we had nothing planned. He just said he was going to be outside in the parking lot drinking.

Redbox.com: But you say that to intro anything?

ROGEN: Exactly!

HollywoodChicago.com: Have you watched it with a crowd? What was that like, especially for you Will, to see like the personal story with a crowd for the first time?

REISER: It’s intense. I think I’m pretty removed from it at this point, [but] the first time I saw it, it was surreal for me because it was a bit weird. I’m not sure if it’s because it’s the first movie I ever wrote, so seeing these characters come to life. I don’t know if it was because of that, but it was definitely surreal the first time. But now, I feel like through the process of writing the movie and making the movie and editing it I feel like the main characters — that’s Joe’s character, that’s his world and I feel very removed. I don’t feel like I’m watching myself.



50/50

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Redbox.com: Were there stages from the first page to now — was it much more intense at first?

REISER: Yah, yah, yah. It took several conversations with Beth and Evan for me to just kind of wrap my head around delving deep into my own.., just delving deep into that world and kind of working out and processing a lot of the things I went through. I was still very raw when I first started writing it.

Redbox.com: You said what you ended up with is not autobiographical but when you started out did you have that question in your head or did you think 'should I tell my story as much as possible' or did you know you wanted to?

REISER: I always knew it was going to be fiction, just "inspired by." Because I never, well for many reasons, like A). I don't think there's anything exceptional about me, like why I should tell my personal story, I feel like it's something that everybody has to deal with this. So let's just make it a story that feels relatable. And, also, I don't really want to drag the people I care about into the middle of my story. I feel like I didn't want to come across as being critical of people because it was a really difficult time and I felt like it was best to just kind of take some of the themes that I experienced and put them into a story.



50/50

Photo credit: Summit

HollywoodChicago.com: But did you ever have that experience where you were like 'Oh, I didn't or I wouldn't have responded that way'? Did you try to keep your own story? Were worried about getting "too fictional"?

REISER: Oh yeah, when I was writing it and we were making it, it was always very much about making sure it felt real.

ROGEN: But never comparatively. I don't think there was ever a moment when he was like, 'Well, I wouldn't have done that so the character shouldn't do it.' It was always in reference to the character — but the characters took on their own being, and their own traits and once those were defined then that was the barometer that we used — not Will.

REISER: Once you get to know the characters well enough you kind of, you know how they're going to behave.

ROGEN: Yeh, and it was never referred against the script. We would let it inform that..like it would be more to answer questions, like 'How would someone react to this situation?' "Well, Will, how did you react?" It was more if we had a question we would let history guide us but we didn't let it define anything too much, you know?

Redbox.com: From a movie point of view, did you have certain cancer movie or illness movie things that you wanted to avoid?

ROGEN: One of them was to not die, that was one of the major things. They die in almost every one of these movies and I personally don't like miserable f**king movies, so we had no interest in making one. And our story wasn't miserable, and there are a lot of miserable stories but they seem well represented cinematically at this point. So, to us, it was important to show that it doesn't always end terribly in these situations — that people do survive. And to us that was a really important thing to show. It just organically seemed to go against the grain of most of these movies and the other thing we wanted to show was that people's lives go on, even when they're sick, especially if they're a guy in their early 20's. They still go to bars. They still have relationships with women. They still joke around with their friends. They still want to do all the shit they did before they got sick and they want to feel...

REISER: ...and it makes you want to feel more normal.

ROGEN: Exactly, so that's something we wanted to show too, because in a lot of these movies once the person becomes sick it's like ALL their lives are about this disease, and the whole.., and that isn't what happened with Will. If you didn't know he was sick you could spend a week with him and not know he was sick, you know? Except he would be going to the hospital all the time.

REISER: And I looked like shit.

ROGEN: You looked terrible - attitudinally.



50/50
Photo credit: Summit

HollywoodChicago.com: [To Will] I read in one of your interviews that Seth and Evan kind of pressured/encouraged you to write this. I’m curious from your angle Seth, why you encouraged him to write it?

ROGEN: Me and Evan both saw firsthand how if you write about your experiences it can be very fun and exciting for you and a lot of people might relate to it, far more than you would ever expect. I mean with “Superbad,” we made that movie for ourselves. There was no — when you’re fourteen-year-olds writing in you parents office, there’s no part of you that’s like ‘Maybe people will emotionally connect to this kind of thing.’ That’s just the farthest thing from your radar. So, we saw firsthand that writing about what you’ve gone through and what you know, what you really personally relate to more than anything, can turn out very well. And not getting laid in high school is way less interesting than going through f**king cancer when you’re in your early twenties, so.., yah, that was really why. Like it’s extraordinary what you went through [to Will]. We made a movie about something very ordinary that we went through so the fact that you went through this extraordinary thing it would probably make that much better a movie and that was really it. We just saw that and Will was really better. I mean Will kinda followed the trajectory that the movie character followed. He was happier after the whole experience than he was before the whole experience. So, it didn’t take much foresight to see that it would make a good movie when you were standing slightly outside of it

Redbox.com: Did the humor come after, or did you find that for yourself when you were going through it?

REISER: From day one we were making jokes, I mean that was the only way that I knew how to deal with it, I was 25, he was 23, we were NOT sitting around talking about our feelings....,

ROGEN: We were both way stupider than we are now, if you can imagine that?

REISER: I had no emotional awareness, so I just suppressed everything and I would just make jokes and that would make everyone else feel more comfortable and that would make me feel more comfortable, you know what I mean? I mean we’re comedy writers and we always try to find the humor in any situation, even if it’s dark

Redbox.com: What were some of the dumbest things, or behaviors, looking back, or ways you had to deal with it, that you look back now and just cringe?

REISER: That we did? What are some of the things?





50/50

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Redbox.com: You've said, Seth, that this character of Kyle was you at some of your dumbest...what were some of those things?

ROGEN: I think overall I was much less tactful, at that age, than I am now.

REISER: I was like a really worrisome, neurotic guy who was really overly sensitive.

ROGEN: And at that age I was much less...

REISER: You would make fun of me.

ROGEN: I think at that point in my life I felt it was my responsibility to point people's f**king personality flaws. [Laughs.]

Redbox.com: You were helping them.

ROGEN: Which now I don't give a shit about at all. I'll let people be neurotic messes until they die and I'll never offer advice again. At that time I think I literally saw it as my asshole-ish duty — my civic duty — to point out how obnoxious people were, which in itself was very obnoxious behavior. But I think over the years, and having a girlfriend for a lot of those years, has corrected a lot of that.

HollywoodChicago.com: So clearly Seth's part was written for him — was it written for anyone else? Did you write with Joe in mind or Anna or anybody? Or Anjelica?

REISER: Nope, no., but when I saw "Up In The Air" I knew that Anna Kendrick was the perfect person.

HollywoodChicago.com: Why?

REISER: She just, I mean, I think that, she's just an incredible actress and she — even though they're completely different roles, she just has this ability to be incredibly serious in a moment, like she's so sincere, and yet she's able to find the humor in that moment, you know what I mean? Her characters are always so grounded and so real and she finds the humor and seriousness all in the same moment. I think she's a remarkable actress.



50/50

Photo credit: Summit

HollywoodChicago.com: And how does Joe make the film different than it would have been without him?

ROGEN: It'd be totally different if it was someone else, he's largely responsible for developing the character and then the whole tone of the movie is kind of taking a cue off of Joe's performance. So, if he was any bigger, it would have made everyone be bigger, and if he was...I think everyone around Joe took their cues from what he was doing. And he just could not have been more grounded and subtle. It's such a non-showy performance, which is my favorite thing about it. I mean it's the type of thing that if you were stupid you would assume that it almost wasn't a great performance because of how un-emotive it is at times, but I think that in and of itself is a very calculated and intelligent choice that Joe made.

REISER: I can't imagine the movie without Joe. He carries the movie.

ROGEN: And he showed amazing skill and restraint. I think, more than anything, that's what I see when I watch it is restraint. There's so many scenes where it would be so much easier to go for it and do this big thing and he always makes the small choice.

REISER: Even the scenes with you guys where you're bantering, he just always stays in character and keeps it grounded and it's very subtle and just lets you do your thing and he lets you drive the scenes in a lot of ways but meanwhile he's carrying the actual emotional wave.

ROGEN: He's always in it

HollywoodChicago.com: And building it and it creates this realism so by the end there...

REISER: ...you understand.

HollywoodChicago.com: And he's completely 3 dimensional.

ROGEN: Seth: Yeah, you get it — you get that even when he's laughing he's a little annoyed by me, and it made it really easy to do. Honestly, it was one of the easiest movies I've ever made.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you know him before?

ROGEN: I'd met him a few times in passing. We have some mutual friends in common. I'd probably met him and probably talked to him for a total of five minutes, spread out over five interactions.



50/50

Photo credit: Summit

HollywoodChicago.com: Were you worried at all, or did you work on that friendship chemistry?

REISER: It was pretty instant.

ROGEN: It was. I think it's funny...you know people tell me I have good chemistry with people, and sometimes it's people I'm good friends with and sometimes it's people that I would really never ever have a conversation with at all but in the context of making the movie. Yeah, and it really has no bearing. I think me and Joe did get along very well, but I don't think that's why our chemistry's good in the movie, I think our

chemistry's good in the movie because we really understood each other's performances and we really got what the other guy was doing and got each other's timing and comedically and tonally we understood what the other person was doing and so it really made it easy for us to work with each other and around each other and it made it easy. We never felt like we were working against each other.

Redbox.com: And it works well because there's a danger with these two characters, someone could be like, 'Well these two people would never be friends in real life'.

ROGEN: That was the only real balance we knew we had to walk and that's the only thing I had to be conscious of. I was never thinking 'Is this joke too offensive? Is this too much? Is this too obnoxious?' The only line I had to walk — I can't push things so far that you don't believe this guy would be friends with him. But when you're real friends you can kinda do anything.

REISER: No matter what they say to each other, that character Kyle is always gonna be there, even when...

ROGEN: But you're just not mean to each other. That's what — you always had to be joking. You're not aggressively mean to your friends.

REISER: And you see the that the moment you catch Rachel, like you see that, how protective you are of Adam.

ROGEN: That's somewhat self-serving

HollywoodChicago.com: You're talking about how they've been friends forever and we buy that from scene one of this movie so I know you're saying that chemistry's not that important but we've all seen...

ROGEN: I think it's important but I don't think us actually getting along is important.

HollywoodChicago.com: I think the writing is key too.

ROGEN: I think it's very reflective of how our dynamic is [as friends], especially at that time.

REISER: We're talking about like not having sex with a girlfriend and like...

ROGEN: It's funny because even when Will was sick he would complain about not getting laid so much more than the fact that he could f**king die in two months.

REISER: And I wanted to show what you're talking about. You're not talking about cancer. You're talking about sex and my way of talking about sex was in this very kind of subdued way.

ROGEN: And my way was very explicit

REISER: You're very explicit. You're like...yeah my conversations with you and Dave, you guys...

ROGEN: Dave was the grossest.

REISER: I wanted to just kind of, and also it's a good way of just showing the difference between the two.

ROGEN: My character's comfortable and his character's uncomfortable. My character was confident and his character was self-conscious about it.

REISER: But it all derives from our friendship.



50/50

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Redbox.com: There was a sort of order-and-chaos thing going on with the two of them. I wondered if the roles had been reversed what would

that movie be like?

ROGEN: It would probably be the exact opposite movie.

Redbox.com: “Animal House”?

ROGEN: It’d be about a guy who needs to learn how to live more conservatively rather than about someone who needs to learn how to live less conservatively. That would probably be my arc, I can imagine, at least cinematically. Who knows about real life?

REISER: I’m not even gonna, I’m not even gonna...

ROGEN: Yeah, you’re not allowed to even hypothesize about it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Now that you’ve done something so personal do you know what you’re going to do next?

REISER: Well, we’re working on another movie together.

ROGEN: Yah, he’s writing another movie that me and Evan are producing. Jon Levine’s gonna direct.

REISER: It’s based on a vacation I took when I was fourteen with my grandma and we went to Jamaica, just she and I, and the travel agent accidentally booked us at a couple’s resort so it was just my grandma and I and she was in the very early stages of Alzheimer’s and I lost her...in Kingston. So the movie’s about them and their relationship.

ROGEN: I play the grandma, I’m gonna play both characters actually.

Redbox.com: You’ve done “Funny People,” and now this. [To Seth] Are you interested in moving toward more dramatic parts?

ROGEN: I just kind of take it as it comes. I was never afraid to do movies like this, as an actor. I think, as a producer, it took a few years of experience to tactfully see something like this into a successful state of fruition. But, as an actor I’ve always, I think I take acting much less seriously than most people so I’ll try anything.



HollywoodChicago.com: Do you look at anybody and say ‘that’s the career I want’?

ROGEN: As an actor? I honestly don’t think of my career in terms of an actor. I generally think more in terms of a writer and as a producer and I’ll just kind of act in whatever roles become available in most projects or if other people want me to be in their movies I’m more than happy to, but I don’t really. Yeah, I’m not the type of guy who will say ‘oh, I’d love to play that kind of role, or this type of role.’ It’s more ‘I’d like to make this type of movie’ and then I’ll put myself in it in some capacity.

HollywoodChicago.com: And then you try to get that movie made.

ROGEN: Yeah, and then I use myself as an actor to get that movie made.

Redbox.com: Is that more of a trend for younger actors nowadays, to be writing and producing?

ROGEN: I think a lot of actors always have. I think there's a big difference between what I do as a producer and what a lot of actors do that are producers, so I can't speak for what Taylor Lautner does as a producer, but I'm guessing it's different from what I do.

HollywoodChicago.com: You work so hard, you do multiple movies a year, do you consider slowing down at all? I talked to Jonah [Hill] last week about having multiple movies going at the same time who suggested it might come in part from being mentored by Judd [Apatow]. You have a close relationship with both of them — do you think you got that work ethic (from Judd) or have you always had it?

ROGEN: I've always worked very hard. I think from a very young age I knew that I wanted to have a job that essentially millions of people want and very few get to have and that I should probably work harder than all those other people in order to up my chances of achieving it. I mean it's very competitive, and I'm not a competitive person. So, my only recourse is to work really hard. And also you just don't know which movies are gonna go. That's why I have a lot of things going at once. These are kind of risky movies, generally speaking, and any one can take years to get going. So, I just always have to have a few things that I'm trying to get off the ground because I never know which one might actually get off the ground, you know?

Redbox.com: [To Will] What about you? Do you want to stick with writing or do you have eyes on directing, producing or things like that?

REISER: Well, I've always been into producing, but as far as directing, I think I need to make a few more movies before I could really consider whether or not I'd be good at directing. But really right now making movies with my friends is really the ideal situation.

Don't miss "50/50" when it opens in theaters nationwide on Friday, September 30th, 2011.



[14]

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