

Interview: Actor, Filmmaker Edward Burns on Guiding ‘Newlyweds’

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CHICAGO – Edward Burns is a recognizable character actor, having introduced himself to audiences in the mid-1990s with “The Brothers McMullen.” He also is a veteran filmmaker, having written and directed that film, “She’s The One,” “Sidewalks of New York” and the recent “Newlyweds.”

Burns has taken a more guerilla approach to filmmaking in the last ten years, preferring micro-budget productions with a consistent crew. Since 2002, he has made six feature films, all outside the boundaries of Hollywood. He has partnered with Tribeca Films for his latest outing, “Newlyweds,” a sharp adult comedy about various stages of relationships and marriage in New York City.

Burns also has had a pretty visible career as a film actor in other productions, more notable as Pvt. Reiben in Steven Spielberg’s “Saving Private Ryan.” Recently, he played opposite Katherine Heigl in “27 Dresses” and will be in the upcoming “Man on a Ledge” opposite Elizabeth Banks. He also has done television, including a three episode arc on “Will & Grace” in 2005, and he portrayed himself on HBO’s “Entourage.”



Caitlin Fitzgerald (Katie) and Edward Burns (Buzzy) in ‘Newlyweds’
Photo credit: Tribeca Films

HollywoodChicago.com caught up with actor, writer and director Edward Burns during this week’s promotional tour for “Newlyweds.” The candid filmmaker talked about his method of movie production and his career.

HollywoodChicago.com: What did you observe or experience that inspired the screenplay for ‘Newlyweds’?

Edward Burns: There were a handful of conversations that I was a part of or overheard that got me to thinking about the subject. One was a friend’s wedding anniversary, where somebody made a toast that said if the marriage ended tonight, after 10 years in this day and age, you could call it a success. That’s kind of true and kind of tragic. In modern marriage, ten years is the equivalence of making the playoffs. Not the

Super Bowl, but it's all right.

That got me going on a script about married couples. I was looking for something also that could be a companion piece to my earlier film, 'Sideways of New York.' That's how the pseudo-documentary style came about, and I knew I wanted three couples. One couple married for 18 years, and near the end of their run, another that were newlyweds and an impetuous younger couple.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was anything drawn from your own life in the film?

Burns: I met a couple at a party, and stole their story from them. They were both in a second marriage, and worked different shifts, he at night and she during the day. They never saw each other, so it was guaranteed to work out. I gave that situation to the main couple in my story. Also if they were older and wiser they would have a more pragmatic approach to life, and I also applied that to their marriage.

HollywoodChicago.com: The reported budget for 'Newlyweds' was less than \$10,000. What kind of planning as a writer/director do you have to do to meet that number. What are the greatest advantages to that level of budget?

Burns: The primary advantage is full creative control. When somebody else writes you a check they are your partner, and they are entitled to a say in a lot of the creative decisions. It's usually about casting, you have to get certain actors to warrant a certain budget. Everything that has happened to me, and to other filmmakers over the years – you can't cast who you want to cast, they change your title, they change your ending, music, lines.

HollywoodChicago.com: I don't picture those guys being that creative.

Burns: No, they usually have MBAs. [laughs] I always joke to them, 'hey, your notes are great, but do me a favor. At the end of the year, I want to sit down in the boardroom and go over the final budget with you. You can imagine how helpful I will be there. That's how helpful you are now.' [laughs] They don't find it as funny as we do.



Edward Burns in 'Man on a Ledge'

Photo credit: Myles Aronowitz for Summit Entertainment

HollywoodChicago.com: So essentially you've come up with a working economic model for creative control.

Burns: For us, this four-person band of production staff and crew, we all work for free, and we all own the film. It's pretty much like an indie rock band approach – you're going to rehearse after work, you go for your filming time on the weekends and if it takes two years to make the movie, you're still going to make it, because we all love it. That's our approach going into production.

When I'm writing the screenplay, we never thought we wanted to make the movie for \$9000. We said we wanted to make a movie, but let's spend when we want to spend. As I was mapping out the plot points in the script, I thought about what they do for a living, where they live and where they hang out. I thought about what locations I get for free, that I can work into the script.

In thinking about the couple who work split shifts, I knew a ton of people who have restaurants, so I made the woman in the couple own a restaurant. A friend of mine owns a small gym, and I called him up and asked if we could use it. He said absolutely, so my character Buzzy becomes a personal trainer. It's a matter of cataloging things you have access to, and lining them up with your screenplay, and match what you can.

HollywoodChicago.com: What kind of transition did you have to make between the success of getting your first film 'The Brothers

McMullen’ in the marketplace, to landing in your first major studio film in ‘She’s the One’?

Burns: We shot McMullen in 12 days, with a three man crew, so I had never been on a ‘real’ film set before. I showed up on the first day on ‘She’s The One,’ with my script, my direction and I was acting in it. And not having been on a movie set before, so you can imagine how intimidating that was.

I was smart because I insisted that the budget ‘only’ be three million dollars. Coming off of McMullen, I could have made it for \$15 million, but I said keep it down. At \$15 million, ‘She’s The One’ would have lost money. At three million, it tripled its profit. I knew that at the larger budget it would have been unruly on set, and again it came down to creative control. At three million, FOX was like, ‘hey, the kid made us a ton of money with McMullen, let him do his thing.’

HollywoodChicago.com: It’s amazing that you had that perspective without the stars in your eyes.

Burns: I think the difference was I was 27 years-old, and I’d already had every sh*tty job a young guy could have. If I were 22, I’d probably would have said \$15 million wasn’t enough, give me 25.

HollywoodChicago.com: Given the landscape in which you experienced relationships in your lifetime, do you think there is a formula that makes a long-term marriage work, in your observation, as opposed to going from relationship to relationship?



Edward Burns in Chicago, January 12, 2011
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Burns: We kind of collectively discovered it, the cast and crew, because that’s all we talked about while filming the movie. We came to the conclusion that in all relationships, marriage, friendships, whatever...sometimes it’s the giant, cataclysmic event that ends it. But other times it’s these smaller petty things, when stacked on top on one another carries a great weight, and that’s the thing that can cripple it. The same thing was true of communication and honesty. It might not be the ‘big lie,’ but the lies of omission that over time can make someone comfortable with not being truthful.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your evolution as a writer and an actor, what do you believe are the greatest lessons you’ve learned, in going from the twentysomething guy that made ‘The Brothers McMullen’ to the fortysomething man of ‘Newlyweds’?

Burns: As a writer, when I looked at the films that I had made, from McMullen through the ‘Sidewalks of New York,’ I was a student of screenwriting. It was important for me to keep educating myself. But after Sidewalks, I don’t know if it was laziness or what, but for five years I know longer valued traditional story structure. I took my eye off the ball, and although the films I made during that time were good, I could see they don’t have that clear narrative drive that the earlier work had.

After I made “Purple Violets” in 2007, I thought that something wasn’t working, what was wrong? I just went back to school, dug out the old screenwriting books and got much tougher on myself. I look at this film, and my upcoming scripts, and the structure is sound. Which makes for a better film.

HollywoodChicago.com: How was the atmosphere on the upcoming ‘Man on a Ledge,’ and how did you develop the nice chemistry you had with Elizabeth Banks?

Burns: I got lucky with Elizabeth. We showed up and became immediate friends. When we did our first scene, the director liked what we were doing, and they ended up writing a few scenes just to get more humor in it. It was a fun flick.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is in development right now for you?

Burns: I am outlining the sequel to ‘The Brothers McMullen.’ I have a great idea for it, too.

HollywoodChicago.com: That’s good news.

“Newlyweds” continues its limited release in Chicago on January 13th, and is available on iTunes and Video On Demand. See listings for theater, show times and providers. Featuring Edwards Burns, Caitlin Fitzgerald, Max Baker, Kerry Bishé and Marsha Dietlein. Written and Directed by Edward Burns. Not Rated.



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