

Interview: Director Paul Weitz Has Tips on ‘Being Flynn’

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CHICAGO – Part of the fun in watching movies is experiencing the career evolution of a particular director. One such career is Paul Weitz, who began with the memorable “American Pie,” went a bit more serious with “About a Boy” and “In Good Company,” and cements his credibility in the insightful “Being Flynn.”

In 1999 Paul and his brother Chris Weitz made their directorial debut with the sex comedy classic “American Pie,” and both have helped each other as collaborators throughout their separate careers ever since. Paul’s director credits have been a progression, becoming increasing more substantial (his pick-up in 2010 of “Little Fockers” notwithstanding). “Being Flynn” connects the director to issues regarding homelessness and the writer’s life, and he guides both subjects with a natural intuition, a respect for his characters and an unexpected depth.



Robert De Niro is Directed by Paul Weitz in “Being Flynn”
Photo credit: David Lee for Focus Features

“Being Flynn” stars Robert De Niro in a late career miracle, a role as a homeless writer that reminds the cinema universe how great the old lion can be when given a substantial part. Throw in some current high reputation actors – Julianne Moore, Paul Dano and Olivia Thirlby – and Paul Weitz delivers a film about being human beings, as much as “Being Flynn.”

HollywoodChicago.com: The director is often compared to an artist who has a blank canvas in front of him. Your color palette included the vibrancy and buy-in of Robert De Niro. What were your expectations when you knew De Niro was your lead, and what surprised you once he applied himself to your canvas?

Paul Weitz: De Niro was involved in the project really early on, and I wouldn’t been able to make the film without him sticking with it. At first it was going to be a larger budget, but it kept getting reduced. By the point I got to make it, Focus Features asked if I could do it for eleven and a half million, and if De Niro sticks to it, they would do the film. Without Robert De Niro’s devotion to the character, I wouldn’t have been able to make the film.

HollywoodChicago.com: What's a good example of that devotion?

About a month before we were officially going to start shooting, there were some scenes of De Niro that needed to be out in the snow, at the point in the film where he's kicked out of the shelter. You never know when it's going to snow in New York City, and the forecast called for a blizzard. Now this was a month before we officially started shooting, and I called him up and asked him where he was. He said New York. I asked him what he was doing the next day. He asked why. The next day he was out with me and a cameraman, with no permits, filming on the streets of New York. We shot a lot in the financial district, because I knew people would just be going to work, not paying attention to the camera or Bob De Niro. [laughs]. It was just so cool he was game to that, and it was his approach to the whole film.

HollywoodChicago.com: You not exactly known for darker material like 'Being Flynn.' Was this a direction for your career that you planned, or was it just the right project at the right time?

Weitz: I specifically wanted to do this for seven years, and I feel like there is an equation, as far as what I'm drawn to, between comedy and tragedy. And even 'American Pie,' which I directed with my brother, seems like a flat-out comedy, but we were very conscious while we were making it, that the reason these characters were going to extremes was the anxiety they were having when they knew they wouldn't be around their best friends, because they were all graduating from high school. That's what we thought about as we shot that one.

HollywoodChicago.com: In that sense, what were you thinking while putting together 'Being Flynn'?

Weitz: In this case, the events of Nick Flynn's [Paul Dano] life are pretty drastic, with survival level questions. But Nick has a really good sense of humor, and he thinks the book that the film is based on – 'Another Bullsh*t Night in Suck City' – is funny, and it gave me license to bring the level of irony that's folded into the realism of the film. It is also the story of two writers, and it made me think about the relationship between ego and creativity, and how destructive ego can be and how important it is to have some humility.



Reel and Real: Paul Weitz (left) with Author Nick Flynn, on the Set of 'Being Flynn'
Photo credit: David Lee for Focus Features

HollywoodChicago.com: What was behind your decision to adapt the book?

Weitz: The moment I read it, it got under my skin. I don't think there is a good reason to adapt a good book, I think the book exists in and of itself. The only reason became a selfish one, that it was personal to me. It's quite strange that it turned out to be my most personal film, since it's based on the life story of someone else. The side benefit is that Nick Flynn is a very generous spirit, to give as much rope to adapt the real events of his life as he gave to me. It would be nice to think I got a friend out of the process, too.

HollywoodChicago.com: One of the most impressive elements of the film is your unblinking portrayal of the homeless and the society they live within. What can we learn from that type of underclass, and how did you express those lessons in the film?

Weitz: The approach I took to homelessness is that I feel each person has an individual route to it, and an individual story behind it that leads to that place in their life. When I spent some time at the shelter that Nick worked at in Boston, it struck me that while there were people there that looked like what you'd think a homeless person looks, there was also people who worked construction that day – as De Niro does in the movie – that didn't have enough money for a place to stay, but were working. It was really shocking the range of people who were there.

The people who work at the shelter were also different, we all think of them as saintly. But there were some people who are religious, there are some who were homeless themselves and there are people in their twenties who need a job, and get a kick out of doing the shelter work.

HollywoodChicago.com: Addiction is also a theme in the film. What kind of research did you do for Nick's road to recovery in that area?

Weitz: The person I was closest to in my childhood happened to be a heroin addict, and I was walking along the same path as him, I just happened to have an inversion to needles. He has happily gotten treatment and has a productive life right now, which I really respect.

So in terms of the research regarding it, I had been around it to some degree, and also the movie – more directly than the book – focuses on self hatred and how you deal with the logical hatred of yourself. And Dano's Nick character is carrying around a lot of guilt with him during the course of the movie, and I feel guilt is a control mechanism. It's too horrifying to think that events that take place you have no control over them, so you feel guilty to gain a sense of stability.

HollywoodChicago.com: How does his father, the character played by De Niro, figure into that role of freeing Nick from that guilt?

Weitz: Nick is too late to want love from his Dad, but he does need something, and it turns out to be a cruel lesson in survival. One of the things the egotistical Dad tells him is 'you can't kill someone with writing, nobody is that good a writer.' The issues of that part of the story were more familiar to me than some of the other issues.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since another theme of the film is how much madness it takes to be a writer, how did you relate to that when you were adapting the screenplay?



Paul Weitz in 'Chicago, February 23rd, 2012
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Weitz: I think obviously working on a story in your head is a form of insanity, but at the same time I think there is a myth that somebody has to be unhappy or make others unhappy just to be a creative person. My personal feeling is talent is detached from behavior. You can have people who act horribly and are talented, and people who act quite well who are talented, so given that I try to focus on behavior, at least for myself.

HollywoodChicago.com: What differences do you find in directing when not working with your own script, like with the recent 'Little Fockers.' How much of a push-back are you willing to go when you don't agree with what's on the page?

Weitz: Well, when I write my own script I can throw things out without any guilt. [laughs] I have a hard time working with scripts I haven't written, like when I directed 'Little Fockers,' I wasn't any good on that. I deluded myself about the degree of control and my ability to impact something in that case. The great thing on that film is that I met my cinema idols, and I didn't know in what circumstance I'd be able to work with a cast like that. [laughs] The tough thing is I let myself down, but that's okay.

HollywoodChicago.com: You are a writer/director who likes to hold a mirror to the American Dream and expose the reflection. In a post September 11th world, how has that reflection altered in your opinion, and how does the country evolve with it, in a negative or positive way?

Weitz: Specifically to 9/11, I think there were a couple of myths that become part of identity if you think of yourself as an American. One of those is gone, the assertion that nobody attacks America on the North American soil. So that made us more insecure as a country. The other myth is that through television and other various media, that we also feel that we're close to becoming rich at any moment. Those extremes seem to be operating in an insane way. The American Dream used to be a house with sufficient bedrooms for your kids, now it seems to be about having a posse of dancers. [laughs]

"Being Flynn" continues its limited release in Chicago on March 9th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Robert De Niro,

Paul Dano, Julianne Moore, Olivia Thirlby, Lily Taylor and Eddie Rouse. Adapted screenplay and directed by Paul Weitz. Rated “R”



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