

Interview: Director Jay Duplass Reveals ‘Jeff, Who Lives at Home’

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CHICAGO – The brother directing team of Jay and Mark Duplass have been climbing the success ladder since starting their careers as independent film darlings in 2002. After winning acclaim in 2010 with the offbeat “Cyrus,” they are back with “Jeff, Who Lives at Home,” featuring Jason Segel, Ed Helms, Judy Greer and Susan Sarandon.

The movie emphasizes the filmmakers intimate characteristic of focusing on characters which on the surface may seem ordinary, but through emotional depth creates extraordinary situations. Jason Segel portrays Jeff, who lives in his mother’s basement, rarely venturing beyond those confines. He is looking for a way to understand his life, and thinks he can find it through a series of events triggered by a wrong number, that asked for someone named Kevin.

Jay and Mark Duplass began their career with a short film called “The New Brad” in 2002. “The Puffy Chair” (2005) was their first feature film, and immediately garnered attention by winning the audience award at the South by Southwest Film Festival. They were lumped into a new film term that came out of the festival that year called “Mumblecore,” defined by low budget productions with amateur actors. They broke out of that mold with the well-received “Cyrus” in 2010, that featured the not-so-amateur performance stylings of Jonah Hill, John C. Reilly and Marisa Tomei.



Jason Segel and Ed Helms are Brothers in ‘Jeff, Who Lives at Home’
Photo credit: Hillary Bronwyn Gayle for Paramount Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com talked to Jay Duplass about “Jeff, Who Lives at Home” at the Chicago International Film Festival in October.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve focused on your last couple of films on the social misfit. What is it about this personality that fascinates you and Mark, and how does it inform you cinematically?

Jay Duplass: I don't know. [laughs] We just keep doing it. Something has come to light for us. We don't know why we're doing what we're doing, we're just two brothers making movies in a cave. We actually start to figure it out when we talk to you guys. We're forced to intellectualize what we're doing, and we suddenly think, 'how interesting, what's going on with me?' [laughs]

With this movie in particular, something came to light, because everyone says 'stoner' about the lead character Jeff, and there is only one shot where he takes one hit in the entire movie. For us, the central occupation of his character is that he is a neo-philosopher. When we went to school at the University of Texas in Austin, there is a very Berkley-of-the-South contingent there, and a lot of guys who we were very close to moved into efficiencies and basement apartments right after graduation, and basically set up a life for themselves in which their whole yearly budget is around \$7500. They consume peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, smoke pot and think about life. And they think about themselves and the nature of destiny and the universe, and what their place is in it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Sounds like you admire them.

Duplass: First of all, those guys are hilarious. When you see those guys wearing cargo pants, smoking pot and eating breakfast at 7pm, you laugh. For Mark and I, they are heroes in a weird way, because they're really trying to buck the system. And they're not doing it in a bullsh*t way, they are doing it in a really constructive and inspired way. But what happens is, for a lot of them, it goes on for too long. I'm talking about the Jeff character specifically here, but this might be the well where all of this comes from for us. Whenever we have that slacker character they aren't just smoking pot and being lazy, there is always something else going on that we find absolutely riveting.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is riveting to you about Jeff?

Duplass: It's about taking one of these guys and putting him into the world and then watching what happens when some of his theories come true, about the nature of the universe, the nature of destiny, and him getting excited and us just wondering whether it's all in his head or not.

HollywoodChicago.com: The scenario you described harkens back to Richard Linklater's 'Slacker' [1991], which I remember was set in Austin.

Duplass: It comes from the same well. He calls it 'Slacker,' but everyone in that film is doing something incredibly specific. Anyone he's featuring has an insane agenda, that's totally unique.

HollywoodChicago.com: There is a theme in Jeff in regards to staying aware of the life around you. What fascinates you and Mark about this concept, and how did you light it up – to use a term– when you wrote the script?

Duplass: I think what fascinates us about it, is that we're not those people at all. Mark and I went to Catholic prep school, and just put our heads down through Latin One through Five, and the one elective we had to choose from was Ancient Greek or Spanish. And we were rebellious when we went with Spanish. It wasn't until we got to Austin when we saw people who don't try to succeed 99.9% of the every waking hour of their lives. And you know what? They're okay, they are just going to be fine. There is something really interesting about them, something magical, because everything for us was just so right brained.

We actually came up with this character seven years ago for a short film, when we were closer to that state of affairs. Now it's weird because our lives have changed, magical things have happened to us. People like our movies. I never dreamed in a million years we would get a feature into Sundance, much less be paid to make movies. What we also learned is that it served us to let go of that Catholic right-brained thinking, and open up to greater possibilities. It seems the more we do it, better things keep coming to us.



Writers, Directors, Brothers: Mark and Jay Duplass on set for 'Jeff, Who Lives at Home'
Photo credit: Chris Spellman for Paramount Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: Why should we root for Jeff in this film? Why does his type of redemption make sense for a withdrawn man, living in his mother's basement?

Duplass: First of all, I wouldn't ask you to root for him. I'd ask you to see the movie, and figure out if you want to root for him or not. I don't think people should root for him, and that is the primary question we're raising, the exact question...should we root for this guy or shouldn't we?

HollywoodChicago.com: Let's talk about the uptick you and Mark have enjoyed. What it is about your perspective that is suddenly drawing A-list stars like Jonah Hill, Susan Sarandon and Jason Segel to be interested in doing your films, and what door opened that started this current phase?

Duplass: I think it's just they observe good acting, because that's what they tell us. They don't tell us that at first, but for the entry level we're at now, we have an enormous amount of people calling us who are giant movies stars, who absolutely floor us, and tell us later over beers 'I don't know what you're doing on set, what you're telling your actors or what's going on, but I want to do it.' They compare the level of acting in really good movies, and tell us that our movies are one step up toward achieving reality.

We actually start crying, because that is what we've obsessed with, and that's what we've been trying to do. We did it with our friends in 'The Puffy Chair' and 'Baghead,' and they have responded to it. It's what has allowed us to make these special little films in the Hollywood system, because these actors are working for hardly anything. They're doing it for the love of it, and to try something new. We're not doing mainstream stuff, so it feels super lucky.

HollywoodChicago.com: Let's talk for a moment about 'Cyrus.' Is there a sense of redemption for the title character, given what his character arc is in the events of the film?

Duplass: I wouldn't say he is redeemed in the film, but our intention was to say he opened the door himself, to go a different way, and also to open the door for the audience to say that this guy just isn't a dick. He is just a kid. Hopefully by the end, people were saying to themselves that he is just 20 years old, and despite having the most loving mother in the world, has been shortchanged in his life. For us, it was more about the hope and possibility of redemption.

HollywoodChicago.com: Does your relationship with Jonah Hill continue?



Jay Duplass in Chicago, October 2011
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Duplass: He's like our agent. He said in 2006 that 'The Puffy Chair' was his favorite movie, and him being attached to 'Cyrus' got the film made. When people ask us about Jonah, I always say 'I don't know dude, I'm talking about movies, and our wives and girlfriends!' [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: What basic, fundamental tenets do you and Mark still practice in your films, despite the rarified air and big movies stars?

Duplass: It comes back to what our breakthrough was regarding movies, when we were trying to be the Coen Brothers and we failed miserably, because they're the Coen Brothers and they are f**king good at it. Our personal breakthrough is when we started exploiting the private conversations that Mark and I had, which are almost always about the passive-aggressive, f**ked up stuff that we do with our families, wives or friends. We would just cringe at the drama, it's was so awful. And they we'd start laughing hard. It's only through talking to you guys that we figured out that's what we're doing with our films now, that tragic dramatic comedy thing, it starts out tragic and you end up giggling, almost feeling guilty for it. It's because we all share this experience. And in a weird way, we're still making movies about our family and friend

experiences, because that's what we're obsessed with.

HollywoodChicago.com: Not many people get the opportunity to have a close, personal relationship with a sibling like you and Mark have enjoyed. You are collaborators, business partners and I assume friends. What are the advantages have you gained from such a rare relationship?

Duplass: You can't bullsh*t ever. He has known me since I was seven years old, bending over in front of the mirror to look at my a*shole. [laughs] He knows everything. Some people observe that we're like standup comedians in person, because we're so blunt and raw when we're together. We don't give a sh*t. We have to cut through the crap really fast because I can't be fake around him or else I'm embarrassed and it's pathetic. It's actually hard in a lot of ways, because we always have to be shooting straight. But at the same time it keeps you honest. It just has cut out a lot of the bullsh*t drama that normally holds you back in life.

"Jeff, Who Lives at Home" opens everywhere on March 16th. Featuring Jason Segel, Ed Helms, Susan Sarandon, Rae Dawn Chong and Judy Greer. Written and Directed by Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass. Rated "R"



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