

Film News: 'Nate and Margaret' Makes Chicago Debut at Gene Siskel Film Center on June 8, 2012

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CHICAGO – One of Nathan Adloff's goals as a filmmaker is mastering the art of the awkward silence. That moment when audiences shift uneasily in their chairs, balancing on the razor's edge between amusement and agony, appeals greatly to Adloff, a self-professed fan of Christopher Guest and Todd Solondz. His award-winning shorts "Untied Strangers" and "Irregular Fruit" are both squirm-inducing gems.

For his feature directorial debut, "Nate & Margaret," the Chicago filmmaker made a couple notable departures from his usual work method, the results of which can be seen at the movie's Chicago premiere June 8th at the Gene Siskel Film Center. Instead of relying heavily on improvisation, Adloff crafted a script with his close writing partner, Justin D.M. Palmer. And though his picture is chockfull of awkward silences—at brutal open mic nights and in tense restaurant altercations—it is also a surprisingly warm-hearted and endearing look at an unconventional friendship. Margaret is a 52-year-old aspiring stand-up comedian whose cynical views on relationships make her the antithesis of Ruth Gordon's life force in "Harold and Maude." Her best friend is Nate, a 19-year-old gay film student on the cusp of exploring his sexuality with his first boyfriend.

"A lot of this film is based on true things that happened to me in college," Adloff said. "The more we wrote it, the less true it became, but there are still pieces of true events and bad decisions made by me. Margaret was partly inspired by friends I met in college who were oddballs. I was attracted to people who didn't have a lot of friends."



Natalie West and Tyler Ross star in Nathan Adloff's *Nate and Margaret*.

Photo credit: Breaking Glass Pictures

"Oddball" is an ideal word to describe many of the characters in the career of Natalie West, the veteran actress who acquired fame as Crystal, the kooky and terminally unlucky pal of Roseanne Barr on several seasons of the long-running sitcom, "Roseanne." The subsequent typecasting that West endured in LA ended up inspiring her move back to Chicago, where she found success on stage, most recently as an ensemble member of A Red Orchid Theatre. She followed up her Jeff Award-winning work in the Mike Leigh play, "Abigail's Party," with a tour de force performance in Marisa Wegrzyn's "The Butcher of Baraboo," which took its final bow June 3rd.

Yet it was through Evanston's Next Theatre Company where West met Palmer, who told her about the script that he was writing with Adloff.

When West expressed interest in the project, Palmer and Adloff wrote the role of Margaret into the script. Palmer's own experiences with stand-up comedy served as the inspiration for many of Margaret's scenes. Yet prior to cameras rolling on "Nate & Margaret," the writing duo got to work with West on an episode of their comedic web series, "Bad Sides," which showcased a series of auditions held by a self-absorbed director (played by Danny Rhodes).



Natalie West stars in Nathan Adloff's Nate and Margaret.

Photo credit: Breaking Glass Pictures

"That was a wild process because it was all on the fly," West said. "At first, they asked me if I wanted to be the difficult actress who comes in to audition. I said, 'No, why don't we turn it around so the guy who's auditioning is a piece of work?' Danny did so beautifully."

For the role of Nate, Adloff cast Tyler Ross after seeing him in Stephen Cone's widely praised indie drama, "The Wise Kids." In many ways, Ross' performance as Tim, a gay teen who gradually comes out to his friends and family prior to leaving for college, served as a perfect precursor to his work in "Nate & Margaret." Cone's depiction of a tight-knit Southern community earned praise for its refreshing absence of stereotypes. Though many characters have difficulty accepting his homosexuality, Tim sees no conflict between his orientation and his spiritual faith.

"I felt like I had a lot of personal ties to the story since I was raised in a Southern Christian home, much like my character," Ross said. "The biggest difference between us is that I'm a heterosexual actor playing a homosexual. In my church youth group, there was one person that everyone thought was gay, but it was never talked about. It was kind of taboo. Tim is already confident in his sexuality. His inner-peace was similar to the peace I had gained from my Christian roots. One of my favorite hymns is, 'It Is Well with My Soul,' and I tried to bring that to the character as well."

Perhaps the biggest difference between Ross' first two major screen roles is that Tim's confidence exceeds that of Nate's. In Adloff's film, Ross' character finds comfort in his friendship with Margaret, perhaps because they're both struggling to find their own artistic voice. Nate smiles supportively from the audience during Margaret's disastrous stand-up routines, while she volunteers as a boom mic operator on the set of his student films.



Tyler Ross stars in Nathan Adloff's Nate and Margaret.

Photo credit: Breaking Glass Pictures

"They each want something from one another," Ross said. "They just kind of click at this point in their lives. They keep each other from being lonely, they support each other, they enjoy each other's company."

Yet one of the most honest and provocative aspects of Nate and Margaret's relationship is the degree to which it halts their journey toward self-actualization. For all of its redeeming qualities, their friendship is so close that it threatens to hinder their growth as individuals.

"When I become really good friends with someone, change becomes a little bit scary," Adloff said. "If you change too much, you might grow apart. Nate and Margaret were so immersed in each other's lives that it started limiting them from trying new things. It's important for Margaret to go to open mic nights, bomb and not have Nate waiting for her across the hall. You have to shoot for your personal dreams, not just hold a mic for your friend's movie."

The dramatic age difference between the titular protagonists causes their friendship to raise a number of eyebrows, but Ross and West had little difficulty generating chemistry for the camera.

"Tyler is a very open and warm individual," West said. "It was very easy to work with him and find a connection. We didn't have much time to form an onscreen bond, but we were able to do it pretty readily. Everyone hit the ground running on this movie. You didn't have time to second-guess what you were doing, and in film, that's particularly to your benefit."



Conor McCahill and Tyler Ross star in Nathan Adloff's *Nate and Margaret*.

Photo credit: Breaking Glass Pictures

In retrospect, Adloff admits that the biggest lesson he learned on his first feature project was the need for more production time. The two-week shooting schedule allowed little prep time for each individual shot, thus causing the cast and crew to rely heavily on their intuition. Without the assistance of storyboards, Adloff and his cinematographer Brian Levin came up with some visually striking sequences on the fly, such as a memorable montage where the disparate lives of two characters are linked by a fireworks display.

"I've seen the movie probably 200 times, and I still can't believe that we were in those locations for enough time and pulled it off," Adloff said. "This movie happened so quickly after we wrote it that there wasn't a lot of time to just sit down and plan out things. Some days we had four crew members as opposed to the normal twenty."

Chicago actor Conor McCahill was cast in the role of Nate's boyfriend James a week before shooting began. It was the first major screen role of McCahill's career and provided him with an unforgettable crash course in indie filmmaking. In many scenes, he acted opposite veteran actress Gaby Hoffmann, who made her film debut in 1989's "Field of Dreams," followed that same year by "Uncle Buck." Adloff cast Hoffmann as Darla, the party girl who first introduces Nate to James. It wasn't until McCahill looked up his co-star on IMDb that he became aware of her extraordinary career.



Tyler Ross and Conor McCahill star in Nathan Adloff's *Nate and Margaret*.

Photo credit: Breaking Glass Pictures

"Everybody has those moments where your partner had fed you your cue and you come up with nothing," McCahill said. "The best thing to do is to stay in the moment. If you go, 'Oh, I'm sorry, guys!' it cuts everything out. You're out, your partner's out, everybody's out of the world of the movie. Holding it there is the most important thing you can do."

Despite the fact that the character of Nate was largely fictionalized, Ross respected its autobiographical origins by studying his director's mannerisms prior to shooting. Some of Ross' wardrobe consisted of Adloff and his boyfriend's own clothing, and Adloff's name is clearly visible on some of Nate's filmmaking equipment. One of the most personal aspects of the film is the relationship between Nate and James, and the unsentimental direction that it takes in the film's second half.

"James was a mash up of guys I dated in college," Adloff said. "Being nineteen-ish, you don't know what you want and you don't care about hurting other people. I felt like I was the butt end of that a lot because I was so naïve. I just wanted to be in love. [laughs]"

Since Ross and McCahill previously became friends at DePaul, the idea of performing love scenes together was initially daunting.

"We both talked about it and decided that our familiarity with one another worked to the benefit of the film," McCahill said. "We felt comfortable with each other and approached the work as actors rather than as 'Tyler and Conor.'"



Gaby Hoffmann stars in Nathan Adloff's Nate and Margaret.
Photo credit: Breaking Glass Pictures

After playing two homosexual leading men as a heterosexual actor, Ross has proven remarkably adept at sidestepping any trace of caricature in his supremely assured, wholly authentic portrayals. He says that the key is simply to hone in on the truth of each scene.

"It wasn't hard to imagine feeling flattered by the attention of someone who you have a thing for, and I figured that sticking to that truth was the way to go," Ross said. "The truth of the humanity must be played rather than the stereotypes. It's the same as if I had to make out with a woman who I wasn't attracted to."

Like "The Wise Kids," "Nate & Margaret" features a gallery of diverse characters who aren't defined by their sexuality. The awkwardness that Nate feels while dating a vastly more experienced partner could easily resonate with viewers regardless of their orientation. West says that she was reminded of the groundbreaking efforts on "Roseanne" to include gay characters in its ensemble.

"I liked the way [Barr] did it," West said. "She didn't make the issues a total focal point. There just happened to be some gay characters. She had a show or two where things were more punched up for comic effect, but the gay characters were just presented as part of her circle of friends. That's also what I liked about 'Nate and Margaret.' It doesn't make a big deal about Nate's [orientation]."



Tyler Ross and Natalie West star in Nathan Adloff's Nate and Margaret.
Photo credit: Breaking Glass Pictures

While many films centering on gay characters are confined to the "special interest" category, Adloff's goal has been to reach the widest possible audience with his debut feature. After it made its world premiere as the closing night selection at FilmOut San Diego's 14th annual LGBT Film Festival, "Nate & Margaret" will screen at Brooklyn's reRun Theater prior to its August 7th DVD release, courtesy of Breaking Glass Pictures.

"I wanted the film to have mass appeal," Adloff said. "Our producer, Ash Christian, said that he was drawn to it because it wasn't just a big gay movie. It's great that we're playing gay and lesbian film festivals. My dream, of course, would be to play festivals that don't exclusively program gay and lesbian films."

Adloff and Palmer are already at work on their next feature script, while Ross is busy pursuing an acting career in LA. West, on the other hand, is perfectly content with staying in the Windy City, and cherishes the experience that she had with her fresh-faced collaborators.

"I felt like I was in good hands with Nathan and Justin," West said. "They were there all along and very supportive. We made a good team."

Nathan Adloff, Natalie West and Conor McCahill will be present for audience discussion at the June 8th Chicago premiere of 'Nate and Margaret' at the Gene Siskel Film Center. The film also screens June 11th and June 12th, followed by discussion with Adloff. For information and tickets, visit <http://www.siskelfilmcenter.org/nateandmargaret> [13].



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