

Interview: 'Your Sister's Sister' Director Lynn Shelton on Fast-Paced Production

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on June 11, 2012 - 4:18am

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CHICAGO – The characters in a Lynn Shelton movie live relatively content lives until an unexpected event ruptures their sense of self. A self-absorbed writer awakens to the fact that he's been a terrible friend in "My Effortless Brilliance." Two heterosexual buddies test the boundaries of their relationship by attempting to film a porno together in "Humpday."

In Shelton's latest film, "You Sister's Sister," three close friends threaten to destroy their close bond when the truth proves to be difficult to accept. As in "Brilliance," "Sister" takes place in a remote location. Jack (Mark Duplass) is still reeling from the death of his brother when he's invited by his best friend, Iris (Emily Blunt), to stay at her family's remote cabin. There he meets Iris' half-sister, Hannah (Rosemarie DeWitt), a lesbian who isn't above experimenting beyond her sexual boundaries, especially after a few drinks.

Just when audiences think they've figured out the direction of her twisty plot lines, Shelton always has a curveball up her sleeve. She's fascinated by the sides of oneself that remain dormant for years until a chance encounter brings them soaring to the surface. The director admits that she loves to hear the stories of couples who went to see "Humpday," and followed up the screening with a six-hour dinner conversation. "Your Sister's Sister" is guaranteed to inspire similar post-film discussion that will be especially enticing to viewers willing to take a deeper look within themselves. Hollywood Chicago spoke with Shelton about her ideal film set, the inspiration that she gleans from Peggy Ahwesh and Joe Swanberg, and how the experience of directing a "Mad Men" episode boosted her confidence when working on a tight production schedule.

HollywoodChicago.com: Has the work of your thesis advisor Peggy Ahwesh at Manhattan's School of Visual Arts, and her exploration of cultural identity, served an influence on your work?

Lynn Shelton: Honestly, the thing that I was interested in making at the time was experimental films. They were very visceral and from the gut. My thesis project was about exploring different levels of consciousness, and I really wasn't thinking about an audience at all. It was pure artistic expression. I was coming at film from the point of view of a solo artist like an art photographer or a painter. I saw an exhibit of Peggy's that was part of a larger exhibit called "Bad Girls" in the early '90s at the New Museum. She had made all of these gritty, gorgeous Super 8 films, and I loved the themes, but the visuals are what got me. They grabbed me on a gut level and she hand-developed a lot of them. So I wanted her to teach me how to hand-develop Super 8 and work with film in that visceral way.



Director Lynn Shelton.

Photo credit: Kyle Johnson

Getting to know Peggy was a true honor. It definitely had a big impact on me. She emboldened me because I'm actually a huge prude. I'm really shy about sexuality, which is actually why I did "Young American Bodies" with Joe [Swanberg]. I wanted to be able to work with actors as a director and ask them to do love scenes. I felt like it would embolden me more if I could understand what they were going through, and also be able to ask them to do something that I hadn't done myself. But it was terrifying, and I wouldn't have done it with anyone other than Joe, but Joe was such a good friend and I really trusted him. When he asked me, I said, "I think this is important for me to do." Meeting people like Peggy and Joe has really helped me. Those are issues that I'd really like to put onscreen, but I have yet to do a "clothes off" sex scene. Every sex scene that I've ever done is "clothes on," which is a good indication of where I'm at. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: And yet your films have an emotional nakedness that make them feel more explicit than they actually are.

Shelton: Exactly, yeah.

HollywoodChicago.com: How had your early experiences on film sets led you to adopt your signature approach of working with a minimal crew?

Shelton: All of my prior acting experience was in the theatre. The first time that I acted on film was on Joe's series. Working with Joe doesn't feel like acting. It feels like you're just being, and I loved that. I was in the process of figuring out how to work that way myself as a director. It's the most natural thing in the world to open my mouth and say something and not know exactly what's going to come out. That was incredibly eye-opening. I had this long, weird circuitous route toward filmmaking. I spent many years as an actor, but on the stage. I started when I was 11, became addicted all through college and then moved to New York to do theatre. Once I tried to make a living as an actor, it just seemed horrible, so I ended up transferring my addiction over to photography and went to art school. My marketable skill was editing, so after ten years in New York, I moved back to Seattle when I was pregnant. It was in Seattle that I started getting hired to do narrative work as an editor, and that's when I started to get this dream of making films myself.

I got an absurd opportunity that I was so incredibly lucky and fortunate to get. There was a non-profit film studio that was very short-lived called The Film Company. It had a little staff of collaborators and they would invite people to write and direct films. I was basically commissioned to make my first feature, which is just insane. I wouldn't know how long it would've taken for me to make it otherwise because I was from the post-side. I didn't know any crew, I didn't go to film school, I didn't even know how to collaborate. I didn't know what a gaffer was. Walking on the set of ["We Go Way Back"] was the first time I had been on a real set. That experience was really eye-opening because we made it in a very traditional way. I wrote the script and auditioned the actors.

I was like, "This is the most inorganic, difficult process," and it seemed like everything was designed to obstruct the central work of the film, which was the acting. I had all these theatre actors, the lead was fresh out of theatre school, and none of them had much experience in front of a camera. Getting the performances that I needed out of them was so difficult. We spent 90 percent of the time lighting, making it look beautiful, and we had 16 days to shoot the thing. We had very little time to shoot on our location before we lost it. That's how it felt. There would be 30 people standing around with smoke machines and a big old 35 mm camera and the [actors] would be like, "[silence]."

That experience was what made me want to experiment and see what would happen if I got rid of all the lighting equipment, 90 percent of the crew, took all of the bodies offset, and just had a couple fly-on-the-wall camera people in the corners. That was "My Effortless Brilliance," and it was interesting because I had already been thinking about this recipe, but I didn't even know if it would add up to a film. And that was when I met Joe. We met at the Maryland Film Festival in 2006. I was there with "We Go Way Back" and he was there with his second feature, "LOL." It was exactly what I needed to see and who I needed to meet at that moment. He was about to shoot "Hannah Takes the Stairs," and then the groundwork was laid for me to meet Mark [Duplass] in the fall. I didn't know how I was going to finance my next movie, and it was very inspiring to hear that Joe made "LOL" for \$800 or something crazy like that.



Mark Duplass, Emily Blunt and Rosemarie DeWitt star in Lynn Shelton's *Your Sister's Sister*.

Photo credit: Steven Schardt. An IFC Films release.

HollywoodChicago.com: The media-created "Mumblecore" label doesn't do justice to the work of the individual filmmakers—such as yourself, Joe Swanberg, the Duplass Brothers—because all of your work is so different.

Shelton: Absolutely. It's almost like saying, "Every film that was shot on 35 mm and used a script and was over 8 million dollars are all the same." The one thing I'd say that ties us all together is that none of us are waiting for permission to shoot a movie.

HollywoodChicago.com: And you're all attempting to capture truth that is devoid of contrivance.

Shelton: Agreed.

HollywoodChicago.com: You had only 12 days to shoot "Your Sister's Sister." Do you thrive in pressure-cooker environments?

Shelton: No. I can't wait to have a two-month time period to make a film. I don't know if it will ever happen. "Your Sister's Sister" was supposed to be a 14-day shoot, which was ridiculously drum-tight. I was already terrified that we weren't going to get it. Then I lost Rachel Weisz, who was supposed to play Hannah. The character had a different name at the time actually, and we had Rose change it so she could own it. We got Rose two or three days before shooting. She was totally willing to do it, but she was in production on "United States of Tara." Those beautiful, wonderful people switched the schedule around enough so she could still do it, but we lost two days of shooting and we had to fly her twice back and forth to this little tiny island. It added quite a bit to the budget but was totally worth it.

I didn't sleep the whole time. I had this incredible location that I had worked for four months to get. The people were initially like, "There's no freaking way you can do this," and then four months later they were like, "Okay." I had this incredible cast, my "crew-topia," my perfect ideal crew—all the elements were in place, and if I couldn't get all of the footage that I needed, I was going to kill myself. I was terrified. I had a nervous breakdown in the middle of the shoot. I thought I was going to have the actors until 5 because they were all going to have to fly out that night, and then I lost them around 1:30 because it turns out the c-plane can't fly past dark. There was fog coming in or something, and I was like, "That's it! There's no way! It's not going to happen!"

The only thing that kept me going and that gave me the confidence was I had just done an episode of "Mad Men." I had been externally validated by this union LA crew that said, "You are one of the fastest directors that we have ever worked with," and that is a fast schedule. TV is fast-paced in general, but "Mad Men" had only 8 days to shoot what ends up being a 47-minute program. [Matthew Weiner] starts with a 60-page script. It was insane the pace that we had to go through. I didn't have any context because I had just been up in the hinterlands making my own movies in my weird, little way, so I didn't really know if that skill set would translate. That made their feedback really helpful.

So I was like, "Okay, that's your M.O. The 'Mad Men' crew told you that you're fast," and it was really the thing that gave my confidence a boost. I asked them what made my work different from some of the other directors, and they said, "You know what you need, you know when you have it and you know when to move on." I think that skill might come out of editing, too. As an editor, I don't want to have 27 takes. I want to have four good ones. There's that little voice in my head that's sort of clocking it. In the midst of all these takes, I know what I'll be able to cobble together in the editing room. So I just became really trusting of that little voice [laughs], because I knew that we didn't have time to linger and do a zillion takes.



Emily Blunt and Rosemarie DeWitt star in Lynn Shelton's *Your Sister's Sister*.

Photo credit: Benjamin Kasulke. An IFC Films release.

HollywoodChicago.com: Rosemarie DeWitt's performance is all the more impressive in light of how little time she had to prepare for the role. When you work with actors, such as DeWitt, who are more familiar with conventional film sets, does that present its own challenges?

Shelton: I specifically chose Emily and Rose because I always find them incredibly credible and naturalistic onscreen. I feel the same way about Mark. These are people who I buy, and that is absolutely essential. I can't have cardboard cutout replicas of people onscreen. I need them to feel real. I was shocked when I talked to Rose and found out that she had done very little improv in "Rachel Getting Married." I assumed that the film was improvised, and it's not. She said that there were moments in it that were improvised, but for the most part, it's scripted, which just blows my mind even more. So I just felt like if she could be that realistic while delivering scripted lines, she would be able to carry over the naturalism no matter what she did. There's no tightness. There's always this digging and exploration—a engagement with the material.

Rose is one of the most intelligent actors I've ever worked with. She's like a dramaturg, she really likes to understand the arc of her character. She also has a very rich history in theatre and I feel like that's where a lot of that comes from, that sense of, "What is this story and what are all the ramifications of what this character is going through?" There were a couple of scenes where she really didn't know [laughs], and she was terrified. She would look at me wild-eyed and say, "Lynn, I have no idea what's going on, I'm trying to understand, but I'm going to trust you because we have so little time and I'm just going to fly with it." And she did.

'Your Sister's Sister' stars Mark Duplass, Emily Blunt and Rosemarie DeWitt. It was written and directed by Lynn Shelton. It will be released June 15th at Landmark Century Centre Cinema. It is rated R.



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