

Interview: Paul Dano, Zoe Kazan Channel Real-Life Romance in ‘Ruby Sparks’

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CHICAGO – He’s the accomplished actor best known for locking horns with Daniel Day-Lewis in Paul Thomas Anderson’s masterpiece, “There Will Be Blood.” She’s the acclaimed playwright who’s earned raves for her acting both onstage (“Angels in America”) and onscreen (“The Exploding Girl”). Together, they are a match made in movie heaven.

The new romantic comedy, “Ruby Sparks,” marks the latest collaboration of real-life couple Paul Dano and Zoe Kazan, who first met after being cast in Jonathan Marc Sherman’s 2007 Off-Broadway play, “Things We Want.” Last year, Dano and Kazan played an anguished married couple in Kelly Reichardt’s existential western “Meek’s Cutoff.” Yet “Sparks” features the couple’s most intimate and complex collaboration to date. Kazan performs double duty as leading lady and first-time screenwriter, while Dano tackles the tricky role of a lonely writer whose lovable neurosis harbors a potentially repellant dark side.

The film centers on Calvin (Dano), a young author who hasn’t been able to deliver on the promise of his beloved first novel. Heartsick after the demise of a long-term relationship, Calvin writes about an idealized girlfriend named Ruby Sparks, and starts to fall in love with her. Then, one day, Calvin awakens to discover Ruby (Kazan) in his apartment. Though this premise may appear to be an exercise in wish-fulfillment, Kazan turns it into a biting satire on the Manic Pixie Dream Girl archetype, as well as a fascinating meditation on the need to control a relationship, and how it halts one from truly connecting with another person.

Hollywood Chicago spoke separately with Dano and Kazan about the benefits of working together, their collaboration with directors Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris (who previously worked with Dano on “Little Miss Sunshine”) and their future filmmaking goals.

PART I: PAUL DANO



Paul Dano stars in Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris’s Ruby Sparks.

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: “She’s out of his mind” is a great tagline. Who came up with it?

Paul Dano: I don’t know. Part of the fun of making this movie was getting to be involved in all of the elements of it. It was the first time I saw different variations of posters, taglines and all that kind of thing. There were a few other good ones.

HollywoodChicago.com: How involved were you during the writing process? Was Zoe open to getting feedback from you?

Dano: With this one, she was open. She’s written plays and it’s not like I always see what she’s writing, but because she was writing this one with us in mind, I would come home at night and she would have new pages and I’d read them. I’d try to be a good boyfriend and be there for her as writer and be supportive. I’d also try to be the best bounce board that I could be, give what feedback I could or if I had good questions, I’d ask them. I just wanted to be there to engage and have a conversation with her for her sake as a writer. I would do that for her anytime on anything she’s writing. She’s the writer and I just try to be there for her.

HollywoodChicago.com: There’s a moment in “Little Miss Sunshine” where you blow a straw wrapper at Greg Kinnear’s head. It got a big laugh in the theater, and in his book, screenwriter Michael Arndt cited the moment as your idea.

Dano: That’s interesting. I don’t remember who came up with that. I’d say that the script was very well written and we mostly stuck to that. There’s no reason to deviate from it. There were a few moments of looseness in some scenes, and that’s what you hope for because film is a collaborative form. You hope that at every stage of it, somebody’s going to come in and make something come to life a little bit more. It starts with the writing, and then you have your director, production designer, cinematographer and all of the actors. Hopefully it all comes together. That might just be a good example of somebody coming up with something on the day that has a little bit of magic to it, it works and it gets into the film. Not every ensemble clicks together. It’s all about having the chemistry with other actors and having the right words to inspire us, and in the editing room, Jon and Val knowing how to help make that flow. Truthfully, it’s sort of ineffable at the end of the day. You don’t know why something ends up working so well, that’s why it feels so good.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was it about Jon and Val that made you realize that they would be right for this material?

Dano: I think it was just a creative sensibility. I think it was clear even though I didn’t know where the story was going. I suggested Jon and Valerie about ten pages into Zoe’s writing. It wasn’t very far, and I didn’t have a clue where it was going, but it was something about the sensibility and tone. I knew that it would hopefully be something that was funny, but also something with depth and heart and a little darkness. There would be a magical element that also needed to feel really grounded and real so you would care about the characters, and when something magical happens again, you’re invested emotionally and you can’t write it off just because it can’t really happen. You need to feel like it is really happening.

I loved working with Jon and Val the first time. They’re wonderful people, and I think they’re such gifted filmmakers. I actually brought Zoe to their house in LA one time. I said, “You’ve got to meet my new girlfriend,” and I knew that they would get along. It had nothing to do with work. Zoe either instantly agreed or was already subconsciously thinking that they would be the right directors. Our producers Albert [Berger] and Ron [Yerxa] also thought they should be the first people we send the script to. They were our dream directors and we were very lucky to get them.



Paul Dano and Zoe Kazan star in Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris's Ruby Sparks.

Photo credit: Merrick Morton

HollywoodChicago.com: Has your offscreen relationship with Zoe enhanced your onscreen work together?

Dano: I would hope so. Hopefully there’s a chemistry and intimacy that Zoe and I can bring. There are certain things that we have to separate from our real lives—this is Calvin and Ruby’s experience, not Paul and Zoe’s. But there are certain things that we can bring to it as well. Even down to the four of us, I think Jon, Val, Zoe and I got to know each other very well before filming and had such an intimate collaboration. There’s always the hope that you’re going to feel that in the film, feel the love and care that went into it somehow. It was nice to be in it with Zoe and be constantly daydreaming about it together.

HollywoodChicago.com: It’s fun to compare your chemistry in “Ruby Sparks” to your portrayal of a married couple in “Meek’s Cutoff.”

Dano: On “Meek’s Cutoff,” it was so nice to have Zoe there because it was a physical shoot, and it was tough. It was in the desert, and we were walking with oxen everyday. The weather was crazy. I consider that such a different working experience compared to [“Ruby Sparks”]. This was so much more intense and close and intimate. There’s a lot more scenes where we’re with each other, so I didn’t even compare the two in my mind as a personal experience with Zoe.

HollywoodChicago.com: Let’s jump to “There Will Be Blood” for a moment. The final scenes of that film play like a Kubrickian “Dawn of Man” in reverse with you and Daniel devolving into primitive beings, while the bowling pin evokes the bone in “2001: A Space Odyssey.” Do you see any correlation to Kubrick in that film?

Dano: Well, now I do. I know I love Kubrick and I’m sure that Paul Anderson loves Kubrick. It was certainly something that was never discussed with me consciously. I think that Paul’s greatest virtue is that he is all guts. I think that’s in his writing, and you can tell it in the emotional potency of his work. It’s coming at you really hard, and it’s balls to the wall. As much of a film buff as Paul might be, my sense of how he works is just a lot of guts. That [interpretation] feels more intellectual to me, but who knows? You’d have to ask him. But it’s really fun to think about the film in that detail. I appreciate it. That’s great.

HollywoodChicago.com: You didn’t have very long to prepare for that role, did you?

Dano: I had about three or four days. A part of me thought that it was a great thing to not have any time to prepare. I just had to go with my gut instinct and didn’t have a lot of time to second guess myself or get nervous. But part of me was like, “Okay, I have three to four days before my first day of filming and Daniel Day-Lewis is probably the actor who prepares the most for his work out of anybody.” So I had to just go with that irony and get in there and do it. Luckily the words were so good that most if it was just there and that was my gut interpretation of it. I remember learning lines the night before. When you have a five-page scene with Daniel Day-Lewis in a Paul Thomas Anderson movie, the ideal circumstance is not to be learning the lines the night before. But that’s how it went and maybe it’s actually a good thing.



Paul Dano stars in Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris's Ruby Sparks.

Photo credit: Merrick Morton

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you have any aspirations to write or direct?

Dano: I can’t wait to direct a film. I want to very badly. I’m trying to figure out something to do at some point. I hope I get to make a film in the next five or so years, but I do like acting. I feel really proud of this film, and as I’m getting towards my late 20s, there’s a lot I want to do as an

actor now. I started young and I always just wanted to try and become a better actor. Now there are particular things I want to do, and I actually feel more ambitious about the acting part of it too. I don't know if I'll write a film or not. I certainly would never try to write a novel or anything like that. I love books, and I have way too much respect for them to put a bad book out there. I could maybe write a screenplay someday or maybe not. It's hard.

The greatest virtue Jon and Val have for me is that they could've made many films after "Little Miss Sunshine," and they didn't because they just didn't feel like the scripts were 100 percent yet and they were working on things. That's more of a '70s approach. Let's get it on the page first and that gives you the best chance of making a film. Then we can try to make it better onset and even better in the editing room, but let's not have the script be 70 percent. If I ever write something or develop something, I will be very keen on getting everything on the page as best as I can, and then make a film. I've worked on films where the script isn't finished, and I could never work that way myself. As an actor, I could maybe do it if I believed in it or knew enough about it.

It just comes down to care and hard work and being invested in the process and trusting that's going to get the result you want rather than just trying to get to that result too quickly. I would like to make something where I have final cut. As a first-time filmmaker, that's hard to get at the studio-level. I'm going to keep my mind open and try to find and develop something to make at some point. I get star-struck from meeting directors, not actors as much. They get me off the most.

PART II: ZOE KAZAN



Zoe Kazan stars in Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris's *Ruby Sparks*.

Photo credit: Merrick Morton

HollywoodChicago.com: Have you gleaned any inspiration from the work of your grandfather, Elia Kazan?

Zoe Kazan: It's a complicated question in some ways. The number one inspiration, not just from my grandpa but from my parents who are screenwriters, is having the example of someone who has made their life in a creative field and has done it no matter what. That's a really unusual example to have set for you and I think extremely useful, just in terms of knowing that it's possible. For me, my grandpa had retired by the time I was born and was just my grandpa. The work that he was doing and that his contemporaries were doing is the foundation of modern acting, so as an actor, there's no way to not be influenced. But it's a less personal influence than people would assume.

HollywoodChicago.com: Have your parents provided you with any particular guidance?

Kazan: It's useful to have someone to call, and have their the empathy more than anything else. I'll call and say, "I'm really struggling with this thing." It was encouraging to have my parents be really interested in reading my dopey short stories when I was 7 years old.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your play, "Absalom," was hailed by some critics for its realism. What made you turn to fantasy in your screenwriting debut?

Kazan: Plays should feel made for the theatre. To me, film is a magic medium. You're sitting in the dark and watching something scaled so much larger than life. I never cry watching theatre and I cry at the movies all the time. I'm a cinephile, and I love the emotional experience of

feeling taken away from yourself. What you can do simply with editing and the camera and music—there’s something magical about it. So when I first conceived of this idea, it seemed totally clear to me that it was a movie. In terms of how I wanted to explore fantasy, the story just came to me wholesale, and I thought that it was something I wanted to look at.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you always have Paul in mind for the role of Calvin?

Kazan: I woke up one morning and the characters were in my head, I didn’t have a dream or anything. The first ten pages of the movie were just there. So I sat down, wrote them down and showed them to Paul and he said, “Are you writing this for us?” It had not occurred to me because I had been so taken by these people and they seemed really real to me. When he said that, I looked at what I had written, and it seemed completely clear: “tall, skinny, glasses, hasn’t gone to the gym in a very long time,” and I was like, “Oh, that’s Paul.” [laughs] But I tried not to think too much about us as I was writing because I really wanted them to speak clearly to me.



Producer Albert Berger, writer/actress Zoe Kazan and producer Ron Yerxa on the set of Ruby Sparks.

Photo credit: Merrick Morton

HollywoodChicago.com: Did this script spawn from your own frustration with idealized roles for women in film, and the male objectification of females in modern media?

Kazan: I’m trying to talk about a male fantasy of what a girl is like and the reality of what she’s actually like, that dichotomy. So yes, I’m thinking of male projection and objectification. The lack of three-dimensional female roles is a symptom of that, and frankly it enforces it. It was somewhere in my brain, otherwise it wouldn’t have come out of me, but it wasn’t first and foremost.

HollywoodChicago.com: Has your offscreen relationship with Paul enhanced your onscreen work together?

Kazan: I think it’s helpful. The first time I saw the movie, I was like, “There’s so little of us up there, but there’s so much of the trust between us.” We were able to go further than maybe we would have normally because we’re not afraid that the other person is going to reject us or judge us. We’ve been together almost five years, so I’ve seen it all. I’ve taken him to the emergency room, I’ve talked to him while he’s dead-ass drunk. There’s nothing left to be ashamed of, and it’s helpful to have a scene partner that you’re not embarrassed to be in front of.

HollywoodChicago.com: As a writer, was it difficult to see your work evolve from the page to the screen? On “Little Miss Sunshine,” the directors allowed the actors to create certain moments on the spot. Was there a similar looseness on the set of “Ruby Sparks”?

Kazan: An actor’s job is to fill in the blanks. When Paul is coming down the stairs and he steps on the squeaky toy, that was something he came up with that we thought was so great. But at least in this case, Jon and Val were really sticklers for staying on script. They don’t allow a lot of dialogue improvisation. We passed back and forth seventeen or eighteen drafts, and by drafts I mean small changes. They really wanted it to be in ship-shape by the time we went into production. Working together for nine months on this script beforehand helped me think of it as ours and not mine. It was easy for me to step away onset and know that they were going to insist that it was word-perfect, so I didn’t need to worry about that so much. The only thing that’s improvised in the film is the charade scene, I really wanted to keep that loose. And you don’t hire an actor like Steve Coogan unless you allow him to improvise, so I wrote some guidelines around which he could improvise and we

allowed him to go from there. I don’t know how much of his improv ended up in the movie, but there’s a little bit of looseness there.

HollywoodChicago.com: What aspects of LA did you want to highlight that aren’t often seen in film?

Kazan: There’s a kind of show business LA that you see onscreen. I grew up in LA and I know it as a hometown, so that feeling of a human-scaled city was something I wanted to get to. LA is just a collection of suburbs. I grew up on the west side and those are east side locations, so I was being introduced to those places as we shot there.



Zoe Kazan and Paul Dano star in Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris's Ruby Sparks.

Photo credit: Merrick Morton

HollywoodChicago.com: Are you planning to continue writing screenplays as well as acting?

Kazan: “Lucky” sounds like a really pat line, but I’ve been lucky so far. I’ve been able to write alongside the acting in a really organic way—writing during the day and doing a play at night. In the last year, it’s been really hard for me to find time to write. So right now, I’m aware of how much I miss it. I don’t have any interest in writing superseding acting because for me, acting has always been my first love. I’m more aware now of how I’m going to have to budget time for it. I’m such a workaholic. I say, “Yes,” to everything, and Paul’s like, “You need to start saying, ‘No,’ because you need to start having time to be home.” I’ve been home for three months out of the last twelve, and he’s like, “You need to come home in Brooklyn.”

HollywoodChicago.com: Was there a challenge to keep viewers involved in Calvin’s plight even as he starts to embrace his dark side? I didn’t find it challenging, but I’ve always been more attracted to flawed characters.

Kazan: Me too. “Is he likable?” is a development line in Hollywood, and for me, the idea of someone being universally likable is a farce. That’s a cipher, not a person. A person can be your best friend, and still can be odious to someone else. I like flawed characters, I like characters that feel human to me, that feel like real people. I like to cite “When Harry Met Sally.” The reason you root for the main characters is not because they’re the prettiest people on the block, it’s because they feel so human. You look at Billy Crystal, and you’re like, “I know that dude,” and that is the kind of character that I respond to the most. Even though [“Ruby Sparks”] is a fantasy, it’s trying to address human relationships, and human frailty is part of that package.

‘Ruby Sparks’ stars Paul Dano, Zoe Kazan, Chris Messina, Annette Bening, Antonio Banderas, Aasif Mandvi, Steve Coogan and Elliott Gould. It was written by Zoe Kazan and directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris. It will be released July 25th at AMC River East 21, Landmark Century Centre and Century 12 Evanston. It is rated R.



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