

## Interview: Ben Affleck Brings Stunning Story of ‘Argo’ to Life

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on October 8, 2012 - 10:53am

- [Argo](#) [2]
- [Ben Affleck](#) [3]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [4]
- [Bryan Cranston](#) [5]
- [Gone Baby Gone](#) [6]
- [Gus Van Sant](#) [7]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [8]
- [Interview](#) [9]
- [Justice League](#) [10]
- [Kevin Smith](#) [11]
- [Superman](#) [12]
- [The Town](#) [13]

CHICAGO – Ben Affleck is such a nice, likable guy that he asks those interviewing him how they’re doing and expresses how much he loves Chicago before you can even get a question out. He has reason to be happy. He’s riding a wave of incredible praise for his amazing “Argo,” the best film of the year to date and a surefire player at this year’s Oscars (come back Thursday for our full review). Ben recently sat down with HollywoodChicago.com, Ain’t It Cool News, and WIND-Hollywood 360 and the conversation veered from the responsibility of recreating to true stories to what he’s learned from working with directors like Kevin Smith & Gus Van Sant to whether or not he was ever really attached to “Justice League.”

**HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM:** How did Toronto go?

**BEN AFFLECK:** Great. We really had a great screening. And you know there’s a little bit of hometown love in there, so we definitely got some appreciation. And there’s definitely Canadian jokes to, not at the expense of Canada, but jokes that Canadians would get that kind of fall flat in the U.S. and it got big laughs at the premiere. [Laughs] So it was a nice boost, and we’re excited to come out here. We did Boston and now here and then I’ll go to St. Sebastian [Film Festival], then I’ll come back and do San Francisco and then New York and L.A., and finally the movie will come out at some point. [Laughs]

**HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM:** I read an interview in Toronto where you said that Warner Brothers took a chance on you, because “there were a lot of elements in this movie that could trip you up.” What were those elements?

**AFFLECK:** Well for one thing, there are a lot of elements in terms of tone that are hard to synthesize. There’s the comedy, the suspense, the heavy Washington stuff that don’t really lend themselves to being woven together easily. Also I think in terms of marketing the movie, there are a couple of ways to look at it, one would be “No one wants to have a Middle East war movie.” That’s thought to be the kiss of death marketing-wise, and nobody wants to have period drama, but to me this is like comedy, thriller, and satire. So you’ve got to position it in the right way and tell people what’s in there rather than relying on them to make guesses about it.



Argo  
Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

**AIN'T IT COOL NEWS:** Along those lines, you have all of these different storylines and threads that really run the risk of complicating things. Is what we see in the film the way it was in the script? Or did you have to come in and organize it a little more?

**AFFLECK:** Yeah, it was in the script to a certain extent. It's one of the things I worked on when I came on board with Chris [Terrio, screenwriter], practically, how we were going to do it and how much of it we were going to do and dialing up and down the comedy. He actually trusted the comedy more than I did and he proved right, that the movie could take more jokes and still be okay to rebound back into reality back in Iran. It was a fun one to work on, because there were all these facets and so many knobs to turn. It's not like one storyline where you can go, "Okay, I know what this is and we're going to run the ball right up the middle." It had a lot going on.



Argo  
Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

**WIND:** I read that you had studied Middle Eastern cultures in college. Is that what drew you to the script?

**AFFLECK:** That was a big part of it, yeah. Middle Eastern studies was something I was really interested in, but I did drop out, technically. [Laughs] But I studied it before I dropped out and I really liked it. It's a part of the world that I find mysterious and unknowable, and I could tell then that it was important to us and since then it's been more important to us now, obviously. So the mysteries of that and trying to unveil some of those for an audience was a really interesting prospect.

**AIN'T IT COOL NEWS:** Did you ever write about the Iranian Revolution when you were in college?



**AFFLECK:** Yeah, I did two papers on the revolution. I was really more focused on the Arab world. Of course Iranians are Persian, but the revolution itself was seen as a seminal event, but like a one off event when I wrote those papers. It was like “And here is this unusual thing that happened.” Now revolution and the unintended consequences of revolution is on the newspaper every day and has been for years with Egypt, Tunisia, Syria now. It’s an incredibly relevant idea.

**HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM:** When you see those scenes of revolution, it’s hard not to think of Egypt and Syria and those other things that are going on. How much fictional license did you take, and how much fictional license do you think you should be allowed to take with a story like this?

**AFFLECK:** I think you should be allowed to take as much as doesn’t corrupt the essence of the story, which is six Americans trapped in Iran, the CIA came up with an idea for a movie cover, went over there, Tony Mendez rescued them, and brought them home. That’s all true and that’s completely legit. Now we do a lot more things that are true than that, but I would say that would be the barometer.

So we had Tony with us the whole time. Obviously, we read his book and there’s documentary. I sat down with him and heard the stories from him, and he was on the set and he was in Toronto two days ago and really happy with the movie. So that’s the truth. Things that we changed are things were like the house guests were broken up and staying in two places for a period of time. It’s like, “Is that really relevant to the truth of the story? Or does it just create more shoe leather?”

But those tensions are what you deal with when you try to make a true story. The car didn’t chase them down the runway at the end, but they were freaked out, and their plane was delayed and had mechanical troubles, so they were sitting there with their pulses pounding, but it wasn’t because [they were about to get caught]. We externalized that internal drama. I think the proof in the pudding how four of the house guests that were there were with us on set, and we had Tony. So we knew we had our barometer with us.



**AIN’T IT COOL NEWS:** In terms of your cast, you have slightly lesser-known people playing the house guests, at least compared to some of the other actors you have in the movie. Someone like John Goodman or Alan Arkin bring a certain baggage that you can use to your advantage in a lot of ways. Did you deliberately try to put these lesser-known actors, who look amazingly like the real people—you put those pictures up at the end and it’s kind of unbelievable...

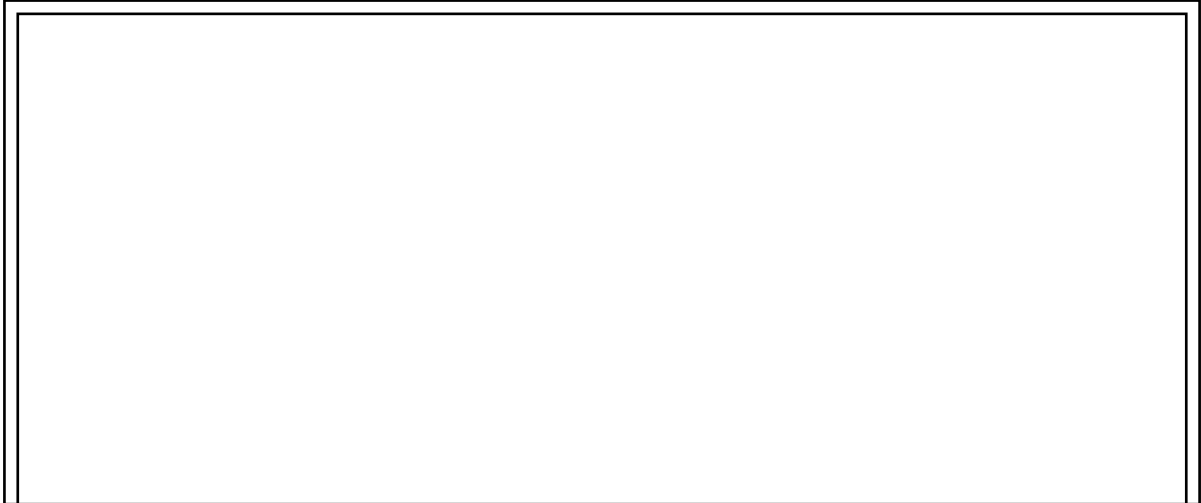
**AFFLECK:** I had to put those pictures up, otherwise no one would believe someone wore glasses like that. [Laughs]

**AIN’T IT COOL NEWS:** I didn’t recognize Rory Cochrane until the end of the movie. Did you deliberately cast people that wouldn’t bring a lot of baggage with them and would be almost unrecognizable?

**AFFLECK:** Yeah, the idea was to get people that you didn’t know—or if you did know them, cover them up in the veil of their disguise as this person. I think the theory behind it for me was, “The audience needs to identify with these people. The movie wont work if you’re not with them, thinking that could be you.” And the more famous somebody is, the more you know that bad things don’t happen to them.

I love watching Matt [Damon], but by the third BOURNE movie, I know that he’s going to kick everyone’s ass, and that’s a different kind of movie because it’s a different kind of suspense that’s like, “Watch how cool he can do this.” Hopefully with this, you think “These guys might not get out of this.” So the more anonymous an actor you find or the more anonymous characters you make, the more I think the audience is inclined to worry about their fate.

**WIND:** I’m actually old enough to know what it was like to be here. My yellow ribbons on my trees actually grew into the trees after 444 days. It really did touch America and I feel that you really did achieve that. You nailed it in this film. What resources did you use?





Argo

Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

**AFFLECK:** The nice thing is that era is the very first beginning of the period when we started keeping all of these archives and records. So I could get the stuff off the TV stations, I could get every broadcast in the news, and they weren't 24 hours either, it was two or three hours of news every day. "Nightline" started then with AMERICA HELD HOSTAGE it was called, and they started keeping track of it, and the show was so popular, they just stayed with it. And there was pretty decent photography that we could use that showed us down to the shirt, the glasses, the shoes, even the mustache, in reproducing factual events. So that was the real asset.

In fact, I was so enamored with all of the research, that I put a lot of the historic footage in the movie and then even at the end I used those images from history. It just struck me that it was amazing that it was recent enough that we could copy it so closely, and it also reinforced the fact that it's true. You hear the president of the United States at the time at the end of the movie talking about the mission, that's true.

**HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM:** To go back a second to casting and who you cast in certain roles, my friend when it was over turned to me and said, "Affleck has the best taste in character actors." You've got Philip Baker Hall and Richard Kind and all of these actors who are in one scene. Can you speak about why you chose those personalities? And Michael Parks comes in for a line or two.

**AFFLECK:** Yeah, those are the highest compliments you can get. It was a great cast, and we had a great casting director, and I also just have a history of a life spent... As actors, you watch other actors and their performances and you pay attention to it and you go, "Oh, that's a great little moment." You appreciate actors more I think, because you're doing the same job. Also, with someone like Michael Parks, I knew who he was, but then I saw him in "Red State," Kevin Smith's movie, and I was like, "This guy is amazing." I saw Kerry Bishé in that movie as well and cast her, and John Goodman was in it. [Laughs] So basically I've cast everyone from Kevin's movie, so it's really Kevin's taste.

And then going to Arkin. I don't know what we would have done if we didn't get Arkin. He is so perfect for that Hollywood producer sort of cranky guy, enough bluster to be full of shit, but enough also to be like, "Okay, we are going to do this thing. I know it sounds crazy." And Goodman, I just couldn't help but think of all of those Coen Brothers movies he was in where he was funny, but so real, whether it's "Lebowski" or "Barton Fink" or "Raising Arizona." He just has this ability to be outrageous and truthful, which is extremely rare. Bryan Cranston obviously is no secret.





Argo

Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

**AIN'T IT COOL NEWS:** Can you talk a little bit about just meeting Tony for the first time and aside from the story, what did you want to get from him in your initial meetings?

**AFFLECK:** The first time I met Tony was when I went to D.C., and I drove into town. He wanted to meet me at this bar and I forget what it was called now, but it was an old wood-paneled bar over by Georgetown.

**AIN'T IT COOL NEWS:** That's where I'm from. There are a lot of those in that area. That's where I'm from.

**AFFLECK:** I know. He was like, "This was an old CIA bar. This is where Aldridge Ames passed all of this material to his handler with the KGB," and then he started telling me CIA history, and it was incredible. It was great, because I thought, "Okay, this is a real thing. This guy is the real deal." He starts telling me his story, and I realized "He's not just spinning a yarn. This is true. This is CIA history. He's got the Intelligence Star, he's one of the 50 great CIA agents of all time."

And I realized because he was so soft spoken and because he was so chill and quiet and introverted, you could tell when he's telling stories that were really heroic, it occurred to me that there are so many people in the clandestine service who do this work and don't get any award, who don't get any approbation. They don't get anything and yet they make these huge sacrifices. Even if it's not taking a bullet, it's "You're marriage falls apart" or "You never see your kids." All kinds of stuff that we take for granted. I thought, to make a movie where this guy is the hero and make it emblematic for everyone that does this and serves our country in this kind of capacity is really inspiring.



Argo

Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures



**AIN’T IT COOL NEWS:** It’s weird to the character, of a spy who spends the entire time in the open. He’s exposed the whole time he’s doing this mission. I don’t remember ever seeing anything quite like that before.

**AFFLECK:** Errol Morris did a documentary on him or featured him in a documentary called “The Little Gray Man,” which is about just blending into the woodwork. It’s like the idea was you should be able to get into an elevator with Tony, stay there, go up to the top, get off, walk out, and somebody would say, “Could you describe the guy that was just in there?” and have no memory of it. So being unobtrusive is part of his spy craft.

**WIND:** You were about his son’s age when all of this was happening?

**AFFLECK:** Almost exactly his son’s age. When we filmed the son stuff, it completely changed my perspective from identifying with Tony to realizing, “That’s who I really am, this kid with this room full of action figures and STAR WARS sheets and the posters and stuff.”

**WIND:** Let’s talk about your directing for a little bit, which I can imagine is very challenging when directing your own acting. Who do you go to, or do you go to anybody when you’re looking at the takes and say, “I’m not sure about this,” or do you just go for it?

**AFFLECK:** There are a few people I will sometimes check with. Actually Chris, the writer, was really good with that. He’s so critical that I would say, “Was that terrible?” “Yeah, it’s kind of terrible.” so I knew once he said that he thought it was alright it was like, “This is brilliant.” [Laughs] “If Chris thinks it’s mediocre, it’s great.” Mostly what I did was shoot a lot of coverage of myself and do a lot of takes and direct myself later in the editing room when I could have some distance and perspective on it.

**HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM:** Do you have directors you’ve worked with who you would say most influenced your style as a director?

**AFFLECK:** I’ve taken a lot from a lot of directors. Gus Van Sant was very chill and creates a mellow atmosphere and allows actors to make their own discoveries. Roger Michell cast every part, like every extra, like he casts the lead in the movie, and so he would create this really cool thing where you can talk to anybody in the scene and go anywhere. Terrence Malick allows the unexpected to happen, and there are no rules. Martin Brest, from him I really learned about doing a lot of takes and letting actors get comfortable and choosing little tiny select bits from each take. Kevin Smith taught me that it doesn’t have to be fraught; it can be about working with your friends and can be a relaxed atmosphere and that can be conducive to getting better work. I’ve been lucky. John Madden with “Shakespeare in Love,” he was just faithful to that text, nice and simple, and the movie worked amazingly. He didn’t have to embellish it or adorn it with all of this other stuff. You could just make the movie.



Argo  
Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

**HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM:** Did you have directors who you didn’t work with who have inspired or influenced you? I have to admit, in all three of your films, I see very ’70s influences, Lumet, Friedkin...

**AFFLECK:** Definitely Sudney Lumet. “The Verdict” was a big movie in the [“The Town”]. Lumet is definitely one of the big influences. The ’70s, like you say with Friedkin, Pakula, all the way to the early ’70s with “The Godfather” obviously and Hal Ashby, Cassavetes. The ’70s to me is the golden age of American movies. There is no end to the great material that comes to mine when you’re looking for inspiration, and so that’s really what I did. There’s a little Costa-Gavras, a little “Battle of Algiers,” “All the President’s Men.” I like to go and find something to influence me before I do movies and really get steeped in it and soak it up. You don’t want to reproduce Lumet—Lumet is Lumet—but there’s definitely flavors of that that I really want in my movies and that I really admire.

**AIN’T IT COOL NEWS:** But it sounds like what you’re saying is what you’ve learned from all of these people is to—rather than impose their style onto your film—find the style that fits the material.

**AFFLECK:** Yeah, Gus used to say you’ve got to let the movie talk back to you. You can’t keep trying to make it into the thing that you’re trying to make it. It’s not that, it’s elusive, and then once you allow it to talk to you and you give it the room to get where it wants to go, it really gets better. And for me, just in terms of being an actor, I know that when I show up on a set and I have the most relaxation and the most freedom, I’m the most successful and I try to provide that for the other actors. I have never seen a movie that I loved that didn’t have acting that I loved in it, so I know that that’s got to be successful for the movie to work. So that’s my first order of business, making sure the actors feel that way. When you to look at Lumet’s movies, they look like the actors have that kind of freedom, and there’s that kind of attention to performance.

**AIN’T IT COOL NEWS:** Do you feel like in this film that you’ve actually made three different styles of film? The Hollywood ’70s stuff had to be so much fun to do, just to recreate that period, but I mean that’s a different movie than what’s going on in Iran.

**AFFLECK:** That's the thing I was really scared of, having these three tones and putting them together. "If it's too goofy and laughy, it's going to upend the stuff that's supposed to be intense, because nothing is going to seem real. You're not going to care anymore. You're going to have the comedic approach to reality rather than the dramatic approach to reality." Also I didn't want it to be bumpy, so I used some real footage. I used some montages. Ultimately, the actors bailed me out, because like I said John and Alan were so real, so even when they are saying the most absurd ridiculous laugh lines, it didn't seem at all out of place with the rest of reality in the film.

**WIND:** I really enjoyed the comical parts of it. I think it eased the tension, too. It's an intense film.

**AFFLECK:** If you try to have an audience be tense the whole movie, they're going to reject it. They're going to push away from it, because the mind doesn't want to have to carry that weight, so you have to have a give and take I think, and you give a few laughs. This was a perfect structure as written where you have these laughs, you let it out, and then ease back into the tension, and when it got to be too much, you ease out of it again. An audience knows when you're manipulating them, so if it gets to be too tense, they will just go, "This is bullshit, you're pushing this too far." Also, life is full of humor. Humor is my favorite thing in the world. We use humor to sooth our own anxieties, and there's gallows humor. There's humor in all kinds of places. You've got to have humor in your movie no matter, even if it's that, or if it's like a movie about two guys in prison.



Argo

Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

**WIND:** I know that one of the messages I would assume that you want people to take away from this is a "Thank You" to Canada, our neighbor that really did step up here.

**AFFLECK:** Absolutely. There was this moment of eruption of gratitude towards Canada when this happened, because they were sheltered by the Canadians. I would like to revisit that a little bit. I think it was a great cross-national moment. Obviously we're also now including Tony in the story, but I want to be sure to note that that doesn't diminish the fact that the Canadians actually did hide American citizens and actually did protect them and put their necks on the line. So yeah, "Thank you, Canada" is still a strong part of this.

**HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM:** We talked about '70s inspirations and being an actor's director. Do you see yourself always staying that way? Would you make a film that's so purely in the '10s, like a superhero movie or a sci-fi movie?

**AFFLECK:** I would love to. A guy who was interviewing me downstairs was like, "Would you ever make a superhero movie?" I was like, "Yeah." He's like, "Really?!" [Laughs] "Do you not think I'm qualified for it or...?"

**AIN'T IT COOL NEWS:** Your name got tossed around recently with connection to...

**AFFLECK:** to "Justice League" or "Superman"?

**AIN'T IT COOL NEWS:** Was that even real?

**AFFLECK:** No. Now because there are so many bloggers, and there's so much entertainment blogging and especially those comic book movies, which are so subject to rumor, and the people who are super fans are on there all of the time. It can be in the Talkback section of something, and somebody else hears about it, and then it takes off and gets its own life. The movie business is such that people get loosely attached to stuff, and so people are used to something being attached to them then falling off that it's never that embarrassing when something that you write turns out to not be true. You just go, "Well he decided not to."

I wasn't approached about "Justice League," although I do think the "Superman" teaser looked badass. I think it's really the right tone. I think it looked great. I would love to do a movie like that of some kind. I'd love to play with all of the toys that you get when you get to spend that kind of money to build images of that scale. One of my favorite filmmakers is Ridley Scott—"Alien," "Blade Runner"—that kind of thing where you're taking a look and you're building a world and you're also combining it with a very grounded story. That's very appealing to me, so I don't know. If you guys have any 3D epics, let me know.

**AIN'T IT COOL NEWS:** I don't know how much you can even talk about TO THE WONDER, but can you talk at all about it? Just give me your best Malick story?

**AFFLECK:** It's a funny movie, because it's not... You've got to anticipate something different than a conventional movie. It's Terry really into silences and telling a story in an impressionistic way. It's non-linear. He doesn't have a lot of literal scenes. It's just like meant to give you a feeling of something. It's about this woman that this guy is kind of obsessed with, and he brings her back, and she's beguiling, and then there's this other woman and then there's a priest involved. It all sort of flows on top of itself. I think it's a "wonder-ful" movie, to make a bad pun, but it strikes people in different ways. It's got the pace of like a Tarkovsky film or Bela Tar, where you have to recalibrate what you are used to in watching movies.

If you are just expecting your conventional three-act story where the inciting incident happens and then the first act ends on page 21, it's not that. It truly is an experimental movie, and experimental stuff is polarizing. I think it's going to polarize people. There are some people who will love it, some people who won't. He's taking what he did in "Tree of Life" and moving further into the experimental zone, so if you didn't like "Tree of Life," it's probably not the movie for you, but if you're interested in seeing something that really breaks some molds, check it out.

**Check out "Argo" when it opens in theaters nationwide on October 12, 2012.**



[14]

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