

## Interview: John Hawkes, Director Ben Lewin on 'The Sessions'

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CHICAGO – Sure to be one of the best performances of 2012 is John Hawkes as Mark O'Brien, a polio victim who lived on his own and was a poet, despite no movement from his neck down, and confined for most of the day in an iron lung. Ben Lewin wrote the screenplay and directed the extraordinary story of "The Sessions."

John Hawkes had been a journeyman actor since the late 1980s, when he began to break out starting with a role in HBO's "Deadwood," as Sol Star. During that period, he was noticed in the film "You and Me and Everyone We Know" (2005), but came out in a major way with "Winter's Bone" (2010), for which he was nominated for an Oscar. "Martha Marcy May Marlene" followed a year afterward, and a notable role in "Eastbound and Down" on HBO. "The Sessions" is a film that he has to carry, given that he portrays the main character, Mark O'Brien.

Ben Lewin is another veteran writer and director, working mostly in television since the 1970s. His last notable feature film was "The Favour, the Watch and the Very Big Fish" (1991), which he wrote and directed. This is his first directorial effort since the TV series "Touched by an Angel" in 2003.

"The Sessions" is the true story of Mark O'Brien, who hired a sex surrogate (Helen Hunt in the film) to teach him the variations on human sexual contact. HollywoodChicago.com interviewed Hawkes and Lewin with a panel of other film reporters, and the questions were as varied and unique as the film itself.



### John Hawkes, Portrays Mark O'Brien in "The Sessions"



Helen Hunt and John Hawkes in 'The Sessions'  
Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What type of physicality did you want to emphasize to personify Mark O'Brien's handicap?

**John Hawkes:** Besides the short film about him called 'Breathing Lessons,' which was the best tool an actor could have, there are a couple points in the script that tells that Mark's spine is horribly curved, and I need I had to approximate that. There is a line when Mark says he

hasn't seen his penis in 30 years, Helen's (Hunt) character remarks that the curvature of his spine may make some positions impossible. That was it in my mind, and since we weren't going to a body double or prosthetics or CGI of any kind, I knew I needed to approximate the scoliosis that he lived with, and I formulated in my mind a device – firm foam about the size of a soccer ball, wrapped in duct tape – and placed it under the left side of my back. That gave my body that incredibly odd look that I wanted and needed for the film. It was the best way to physically illustrate the disability. Many other things went into it, but that was the key.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** There was a quote that you made regarding a role you were going after, in which you said you felt 'shameful every day.' What is the feeling behind that quote?

**Hawkes:** It was an exaggeration of sorts, I guess I should be shameful sitting in this nice hotel suite, with free food and coffee. [laughs] This isn't my upbringing. I think it was a glib response, the director did imply that alienation and I said 'every day.' There are some days when I sleep all day. [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In relating that to Mark O'Brien, did you regard him as an outsider?

**Hawkes:** I think it's just a given. When you live in an iron lung, you're not going to be a mainstreamer. You're going to be inside a lot, an insider as much as an outsider. I didn't have to push that as much, but as Mark said in his autobiography, that he felt that disabled people were invisible to able bodied people. He was referencing the book 'Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison, about an African American man in the 1950s. The situation at the top is fraught with being an outsider, I didn't have play against the fact that Mark was dealt a bad hand.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Did he transcend that outsider status, in your opinion?

**Hawkes:** I think towards the end of his life he fell in love, he had his poetry published and was beginning to be noticed. He was being interviewed and had the documentary short film about his life win an Academy Award. These were all things that made him feel less alone in the world for sure.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How did train yourself to use the mouth stick that O'Brien uses to type and answer the phone?

**Hawkes:** I went to the hardware store and bought a piece of dowel rod, cut it to proper length, got a pencil eraser and slipped it over one end, and on the other end had duct tape and a kid's balloon over it so I could get the right grip. I would then lie on the couch and type, turn the pages of a book and dial the phone.

If I was doing a play with this character, I probably would have put a hundred hours into the process, but with film I could drop the mouth stick occasionally, and it wouldn't matter. When I saw the finished film, I was a bit disappointed that there wasn't much mouth stick action, because I got pretty good at it, but the film isn't about the mouth stick.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Despite what most people say, disabled people do tend to have a different emotional make-up, how did you find your way into that?

**Hawkes:** Most of it was in the script, and the rest of it was an attempt to fight self pity. Just at the outset, that was a mandate before I accepted the role, and when I talked to Ben [Lewin, the director] at our first meetings, he readily agreed. We were in real agreement about how we were going to tell this story on some level. Also lying on that foam ball, my body twisted into an awkward position and trying to keep no movement from the neck down, often that would make me angry and frustrated enough so that if I needed to feel that way in the scene, it was easy to access.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You said at the Q&A after the movie last night, that you were trying directly to imitate the voice of Mark O'Brien. When play a real person, how is that different than just capturing the emotions?



William H. Macy and John Hawkes in 'The Sessions'  
Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

**Hawkes:** If you're playing Richard Nixon for example, someone who is known and there is footage of, you're going to try to emulate the character and use the voice. Since there was the film documentary of Mark O'Brien, at first I was afraid to watch it during my first weeks of



preparation, but when I did I still had seven weeks to prepare. It changed everything. I like specificity as an actor, and it was very specific as to his attitude, how his body was twisted, the sound and timbre of his voice.

So I tried to impersonate Mark as best as I could, because I feel like the more specific you can be in truthful details in any story that you tell, the more universal the story will become and I knew that people who knew Mark would see the film, and I wanted them to recognize at least something of their friend or family member in their performance.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** It was interesting when Mark in the film talked to his attendant about the first time she had sex. What did you bring in from the experience of your first time to the character you portrayed?

**Hawkes:** I'm not a trained actor, but I've read that part of the method might be to use sense memory. But when something is so well written and vital for us, as actors to pretend, that is enough to bring the emotion that is needed for the scene.

One thing that really helped is that Helen Hunt and I avoided each other before the shoot. We were told that the four sessions would be shot chronologically, which was a great gift from Ben. And so in the first session scene we didn't know each other. In the film we were able to capture something for the very first time between two human beings, and capture it for all time. So a lot of what is going on in the first session scene, between me and Helen, is happening for the first time. That was the key. Then as we got to know each more as the sessions were filmed, then we were more comfortable.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You've talked about your almost over preparation for a film. Given that this was a technical shoot, were you more like an analyzer on set or a poet artist?

**Hawkes:** I try to be both. The analyzer part is the preparation and poet part is to forget everything I've preconceived when the director calls action and letting it all happen. And by the way, from the technical side, I was never not on my mark. [laughs] I had my blocking down cold.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** This this experience teach you more about acting, or just life in general?

**Hawkes:** It taught me you can move your head 90 degrees and that is the sum of your movement, and have it work okay. As a whole, like everyone in human nature, I've haven't had great ease when encountering disabled people. I've always tried to be very inclusive and open to people, wanting to believe that every person I come across has value and worth, until they prove otherwise, and it is the same for disabled people. Hopefully now I see the person more.



**Ben Lewin, Director of "The Sessions"**



Director Ben Lewin with William H. Macy on the set of 'The Sessions'

*Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How have audiences been reacting in general in your pre-screenings of the film?

**Ben Lewin:** I find them really fascinating. In most cases, there is someone in the audience that you pushed a very button on, and they come out with very private information. They feel comfortable venting something that in other venues would be very personal information. In Toronto, for example, there was a guy who got up and said he'd been a sex surrogate for 30 years, and it was somehow the first time he felt comfortable talking about it publicly. That wasn't the first time that someone in the sex surrogate community – whatever that is – has stepped up and said that they identified with the film.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The film presented that balance between our emotional state and our physical nature. What do you think the advantage is, as human beings, that we have emotions that interact with our physical beings?

**Lewin:** I guess the underlying notion in the movie is that sex is only the beginning, that physical connection is a root to emotional connection. I think in the case of Mark O'Brien, there is a hold element of him being starved of touch. I think this was an indication that he was only used to being touched medically or mechanically, and I think that people take for granted that touch, even among relative strangers, is an everyday thing. It is an emotional communication, either trivial or more meaningful. That is what Mark was deprived of, and I think we made quite a big deal about his body awareness exercises as a root to understanding that touch can be pleasurable.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Well, touch has become more sexualized in society and you seemed to do something different. Were you thinking about that as you were writing the screenplay?

**Lewin:** It was kind of a revelation for me, although it shouldn't have been, when I was unraveling Mark's story. It's a cultural thing regarding touch, that varies from person to person. In London, for example, you don't make eye contact with people. It's regarded as a hostile thing to do there. But in Los Angeles, people are always making eye contact, to say hello. At first I thought it wasn't sincere, but now I've grown used to it. So in some cultures, bodies in proximity to each other demand some kind of connection, you don't ignore it. It varies from one place to another.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In developing the story, were there any roadblocks in making sure the interactions between Mark and the people around him were truthful?

**Lewin:** One of the biggest surprises to me, when I read Mark's article about hiring a sex surrogate, was how explicit and 'full frontal' it was. I thought I wanted to go in that same direction. But when I was writing it in script form it really made me cringe. There were sexual elements that were difficult to show on screen, just using me as a test audience it was too much information. I found that the priest character, beyond being a spiritual adviser, became sort of a conduit to move the explicit stuff from the bedroom to the confessional. So instead of making you cringe, it would make you laugh. His reaction would make you laugh. That unexpectedly developed during the writing.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You had a news report in the beginning of the film that highlighted the clichés of the handicapped – the courage, heart and feel good aspect. How did you deflate these clichés in writing and directing Mark's stories?

**Lewin:** I actually liked that opening cliché news report, because we read it for exactly what it is, so old fashioned that it's almost politically incorrect, almost patronizing. I like kicking it off like that, because he was a poster child for independence with his handicap, with the most unlikely type of independence you can imagine, to live in an iron lung and somehow control your own destiny.

Otherwise, I don't adhere to any political correctness, humor is a way to defy that correctness. The very character of Cheryl [the sex surrogate] in calling a vagina a vagina, is like learning to drive and here is the steering wheel, we don't call it anything else. It was part of the whole language of the movie, so I hope it puts a dent in the culture of political correctness.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You have two religions interacting in 'The Sessions.' in their interaction with the physical form. What forgiveness were you seeking from the Catholic and Jewish faiths?

**Lewin:** It was encapsulated in the line where Mark says, 'you can't have too much insurance.' I would describe myself as a fundamentalist atheist, but I am fascinated on how religion plays into people's lives. I've come to respect it more and more, there are reasons people have religion and they have it in very personal ways. I don't think everyone does it according to the 'book,' I don't think he did. I hope I was saying something about the flexibility of religion. That God is someone you can blame as well as worship.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Was William H. Macy a recovering Catholic? He seemed to play the priest like he was.

**Lewin:** I think Macy tell you more about sin than I lot of people I know. So in that sense, I think he's an ideal Catholic. [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** This spirituality in the film, you seem drawn to it, in the sense that everyone has their own journey?

**Lewin:** As a writer, you have to appreciate people who are poets – even though I'm not one – because I relate to people who are. They re-interpret life, and that re-interpretation is often what we call spirituality. You translate the mundane details into something a little bit larger. I was groping for that kind of thing, without having a particular angle. For me, the cat in the beginning of the film is a spiritual element. By chance, it became part of his story.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Why did you include his unrequited relationship with the caregiver in the beginning of the story? Was it to establish his desire?

**Lewin:** He wrote so much poetry about that girl, that obviously that he had an ongoing obsession that went for years. It went from total devotion to fiery anger, which everyone has problems letting go of when we're more naive. I thought that was good kicking off point for him to consider what it is all about.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** I had read that you considered disabled actors for the role, but what was it about John Hawkes that had you know that he could take on the part?

**Lewin:** Partly a casting director, who took the project very personally. She seemed to think that John would give it more than anyone else, really bring soul to it, I was inclined to believe her. When I met him, I did feel an affinity between him and the character of Mark.

There was a wryness about him that I related to, and that's the way I wanted Mark to be portrayed. John is also a sweet natured guy, nothing

like the creepy parts he has played. Also at a physical level, I was looking for a small framed actor, because I didn't want to do computer generation or body doubles, it would be a total nightmare. We could cheat a bit, because people don't really remember what having polio looks like. I had a doctor friend who looked at a rough cut, and was convinced that John was a real polio victim. I felt that John had the right physical frame, and the right motivation to accomplish the transformation. I just felt like I was on a roll, and everything that happened was meant to be.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In your immersion into this story, what did you learn personally about love?

**Lewin:** If I didn't know it already, I became more aware that sex is only the beginning. That moment of disillusionment that he has, as in is that all there is, is part of the journey. In the sense that I have any messages about love, maybe it was that the priest, in all his verbosity, had nothing to say. [laughs] I think also that in the end, whatever it is, you're just not going to put your finger on it. It's not definable.

*‘The Sessions’ continues its limited release in Chicago on October 26th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring John Hawkes, Helen Hunt, William H. Macy and Moon Bloodgood. Screenplay by Ben Lewin. Directed by Ben Lewin. Rated “R”*



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