

Interview: Paul Feig Proves Again That Women Are Funny in ‘The Heat’

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CHICAGO – Every once in a while, some moron brings up the argument again that men are funnier than women. These people are not only ignorant, they’re not paying attention to the current state of the genre. Whether it’s the state of the form on TV in shows like “Nurse Jackie” & “Parks & Recreation” or the success of films like “Bridesmaids” and the upcoming “The Heat,” women are ruling comedy. One of the most important people behind this truth is Paul Feig, director of both of those films and a man who has worked on nearly every major TV comedy of the last decade. He came to Chicago recently for “Just For Laughs” to talk about “The Heat,” starring Melissa McCarthy & Sandra Bullock, opening this Friday.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Right from the beginning of “The Heat,” there’s a credit sequence with soul music behind it – I think credits set a tone – and I started thinking about ‘70s/’80s buddy comedies like “48 Hours.” Are there are any of those that you considered directly as influences on this film?

PAUL FEIG: The two direct ones were “48 Hours” and “Beverly Hills Cop.” Tonally it’s what I like. What I don’t like and what I didn’t want to do was to make sure that it wasn’t silly. We hired Mike McDonald [of “MadTV”], one of the funniest guys around, to be my bad guy and there’s real danger. In those films like “48 Hours” and “Beverly Hills Cop,” they’re killing guys. To me, that makes it funnier. The stakes are high. It’s real. You take your funny leads and put them in danger...if you’re just going joke to joke then it’s hard to sustain. You need to keep your audience interested in what’s going on. If they’re worried about the safety of your two leads then they’re going to be with you even more.



Paul Feig of The Heat
Photo credit: Fox

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: It strikes me as well that those movies really tapped into a “star of the moment” in Eddie Murphy. It feels like Melissa McCarthy is in a similar moment in comedy. Why is she there?

FEIG: She is just SO funny. Having done “Bridesmaids” with her, she was such a breakout. I was embarrassingly not familiar with her work. I pride myself on knowing everybody but she and I were never in sync. I never went to the Groundlings. It wasn’t until we were trying to figure out who to cast in that role and Kristen and Annie, the writers, said, “You got to see Melissa.” She came in and blew us all away to the point that we started adjusted the script to give her more to do. That whole scene where she beats up Kristen on the couch was not in the script at all. A 3rd-party character kind of gave her an adjustment. The minute that movie finished, I was like, “I want to do another project with you.” It just so happened that while I was figuring out what to do with her, she was becoming an even bigger comedy star. “Identity Thief” was huge. Unbelievably huge. We were doing this at the same time. There’s always this fear because she hadn’t been a lead. I’ll admit to being worried about what “Identity Thief” was going to be. What if it comes out and doesn’t do well? Then we’re kind of screwed, although we have Sandra. We had an insurance policy in a way. I really wanted to work with Sandra AND she’s a big movie star, which works out great.



The Heat
Photo credit: Universal

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: It didn’t really dawn on me that “Identity Thief” was her first lead because she had won an Emmy, she had killed on “SNL,” and so I think a lot of the world considered her a lead already.

FEIG: But that doesn’t mean you can carry a movie. We all know that. We’ve seen that borne out.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Especially TV stars.

FEIG: Exactly. So we all breathed a collective sigh of relief when “Identity Thief” went through the roof.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Why Sandra?

FEIG: I’m a big fan. I’ve always wanted to work with her. I wanted to make her do my style of comedy.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: This is different for her. And I like that. She had been kind of in a romantic comedy rut.

FEIG: You know, every era has a slightly different one. But there’s a baseline of talent that great people have. “I want to see what happens if we take them in a slightly different direction.”

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: That’s what GOOD directors do. Too many directors say, “We know this works and let’s do it again.”

FEIG: That’s true. It’s such a waste. It takes so much to get a movie made. The fortunate thing was that Sandra was interested in this when the script came to me and I jumped on it. They mentioned other actresses during pre-production and I just felt like this was a perfect role for Sandra. When I met her...she’s funny. She’s funny in real life and so right for the character, who’s smart but a little too analytical.





The Heat
 Photo credit: Universal

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: It strikes me that your supporting cast is mostly playing against type. You mentioned McDonald as a villain. You have Marlon Wayans and he doesn’t do anything broad. You have Demian Bichir in a comedy. Do you do that intentionally?

FEIG: I like to twist it a little bit. But I would never hire anyone unless they were great. I wanted to work with McDonald for a long time. We had that role and you see all the scary guys in audition. And I remember seeing McDonald on the audition sheet and thinking it was weird. And his audition was great. I’d rather have someone who can be scary and I know they can be funny if needed. You get this extra layer. Demian was a real gift. I really love him. I loved his work from “Weeds.” And I love Marlon. He’s such a great actor.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: What was the toughest element of this production?

FEIG: The scheduling. Melissa had gone off to do “Identity Thief” and I was going to do another project and this script dropped into my lap. It was two weeks after she had gone away. I read it and fell in love with it but she would be shooting until beginning of July but then had to go back to “Mike & Molly.” The agents and everyone said there wasn’t enough time. Basically, we would be out scouting and I would call it “Dead Man Walking.” It was eight weeks from when I read the script to starting production. We never gave up. We figured out a way to stuff most of it into 6 weeks. I saved all of Sandra’s solo stuff for the end. And then Melissa had to go back to L.A. and shoot “Mike & Molly” and on her days off fly back and shoot with us. She had three weeks where she was working 7 days a week and was SO exhausted. She was ready to drop.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: You almost forget that she’s on a 22-episode series because no one else with that commitment does two major Hollywood comedies in one year.

FEIG: No. Credit everyone who scheduled and the crew who made that happen.



The Heat
 Photo credit: Universal

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: With “Bridesmaids” and now “The Heat,” I’m sure you get asked about the role of the female in modern comedy and I want to take it a step further because a lot of your TV work has been with strong female comedians like “Parks and Recreation,” “30 Rock,” “Nurse Jackie.” I do a lot of TV and I’m working on Emmy piece in which the Actress in a Comedy candidates simply destroy their male counterparts. Why are there so many great female comedy roles being written for TV?

FEIG: Television is about getting people to find something on their remote. Movies are about getting people to get up and go to the theater. Hollywood has these business models, maybe they're accurate, that show that movies starring guys just make more money. On top of that there's the international thing. There's hardly any female stars who have international appeal. You put The Rock in a movie and it plays all over Asia. It's become accepted. Hollywood only does stuff it makes money. They're not a humanitarian organization. My goal is to be tired of accepting that. To this day, I still get lectured by producers who tell me I don't want to be the "women's guy." Why not? How do we break that down? How do we make more international stars? How do we make movies where even if the female in the lead isn't a STAR that they know, they go "I still want to see that"? That's the trajectory of my career now. I want to just keep working with great women. I love it. It's my sensibility. I'm not comfortable with that sort of "guy comedy." It's not what I do and so many people do it great. There's so many women I want to help get bigger.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: The talent pool is deeper right now.

FEIG: It totally is. And the clock is ticking. There are women I know and I say, "You should all be famous now." I only do so many movies. If this movie makes a lot of money, Hollywood will keep doing them. If it doesn't, they won't. If movies starring kittens made money, there'd be a million kitten movies.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: How has the TV work you've done made your films different?

FEIG: I couldn't have done this movie because of how fast we had to move. You get very good in TV of moving fast but giving yourself enough time to get what you need. You learn how to simplify how you shoot. You learn how to keep your mind on a budget. I've been a producer for too long. I've got a good reputation of being on time, under budget.



The Heat

Photo credit: Universal

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Is there any bittersweet response to the current adoration of "Freaks and Geeks"? Do you want to scream, "Why didn't you watch it then?!?!?"

FEIG: There are moments. I'm very zen about it. It was hard when it went down at first. The fact that it exists and keeps going as strongly as it does...there are moments where you're like, "Maybe we would have jumped the shark." You like to assume you wouldn't.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: True. You've got the "What would Nirvana sound like now" argument.

FEIG: (Laughs.) Exactly. True. People say, "Would you do a reunion?" And I'm very hesitant. If we had an amazing idea. I know some of the actors are thinking about. Who knows? I'm just so terrified of polluting the memory with something that didn't work. It's terrifying. I have much more fun watching Seth and Franco in "This is the End."

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: You've done "Mad Men" and "Nurse Jackie" has some dramatic elements and you did "I Am David," do you want to go back to drama?

FEIG: The way I do comedy, even though it kind of goes for it, I work so hard on the dramatic throughline underneath it. Once you have that and it works, it's more fun to say, "How can I make this funny?" That's what I like. The biggest mistake in comedy is trying to be funny all the time. You don't invest. And you lose interest in it.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Your work, even the TV stuff, seems plot driven and not joke driven. It's always about what the characters are doing and not the punchline.

FEIG: That's why I thought the first "The Hangover" was such a revelation. It had such a driving plot. That's how you should do it. All the comedy comes out of the quest you're on. The stakes that are created for that. In a movie, I'm hard on the story.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Wrapping it all the way around, those '80s comedies like "48 Hours" were very plot driven. There was a mystery, a story, a villain...

FEIG: Yeah. I really am enamored by that and I want to keep playing in that world.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Do you know what’s next?

FEIG: Hopefully, it will be this female James Bond movie that I want to get going. We’re trying to nail down our lead. We’re also writing a sequel to this just in case. I want to have it teed up. I always hate when a movie does great and it takes too long or they rush out a script.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: What’s the story on “Bridesmaids 2”?

FEIG: No story. It’s so up to Kristen. I wouldn’t count on one any time soon.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: This works better as a franchise.

FEIG: It’s just set up that way. Honestly, just coming with a story for “Bridesmaids 2”...all right, who’s getting married?



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