

Interview: The Polsky Brothers Activate ‘The Motel Life’

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CHICAGO – Alan and Gabe Polsky are brothers, film producers and now directors. The sibling tandem make their debut with “The Motel Life,” featuring Emile Hirsch and Stephen Dorff as disparate brothers trying to make a go in life with no money and no prospects, just a series of random motels and their unbreakable kinship.



Alan and Gabe Polsky for ‘The Motel Life,’ on the Red Carpet during the Chicago International Film Festival
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Brothers Alan and Gabe Polsky are known as producers, for notable films like “The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call - New Orleans” (2009) and the HBO documentary “His Way” (2011, profiling producer Jerry Weintraub). “The Motel Life” is the first time as directors, adapting the source novel by Willy Vlautin. This is a stylish film, with an added touch of animation to fulfill the fantasy elements of storytelling between the film brothers.

The brothers Polsky introduced their film at the recent Chicago International Film Festival, and sat down to talk to HollywoodChicago.com prior to the screening.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've both been prominent and notable producers in the business. What prompted you to go to another level as directors and adapt this novel?

Alan Polsky: Ever since we got into the business, we had an eye on directing, and we were waiting for the right piece of material to come along. When we read the book 'The Motel Life,' there were so many things in the novel that hit in the core of what we're trying to do as filmmakers. And we felt like it was in a budget range that was manageable for us as a first picture. It dealt with certain themes that we have a handle on, and we'd be able to convince certain talents to work with us. There was a lot going for it that was right in the sweet spot.

HollywoodChicago.com: In telling a story like this, what do you believe are the advantageous of telling it within the time frame that its set, besides the reference to the Tyson-Douglas fight. What do you think is most different about 1990, now that its 23 years later?

Gabe Polsky: We always saw the story as something timeless, one that could be valid twenty years from now, a very universal story. We didn't focus on it, and visually we wanted the film to have a classic feel. The fight dates it, and its a nice set piece in the film, but other than that we didn't focus on the times.

HollywoodChicago.com: You were fortunate enough to have two great actors facing off as the brothers. What did you observe about Emile and Stephen in their process to become these characters, and what do you admire most about their method?

Alan Polsky: Both of them are very different, but both take their jobs very seriously. While they both have a different process, they both want to do a ton of research and really understand those guys. Our rehearsal process was mostly regarding talking about the characters. 'Would Frank do this? What would he do in this scene?' They are both curious actors, and so on-board with understanding the brothers and pulling from the inner world that they could pull from as the actor on screen. I so respect that – the more research you do, the more you internalize it, the more you fill that world up. And subsequently it comes out on screen.

Gabe Polsky: You could tell they wanted to tell the story as bad as we did.

HollywoodChicago.com: With actor Dakota Fanning making the transition to more adult roles, does she have any sensitivity as to what direction she wants that journey be, and how doe that relate to the decision to do your film?

Gabe Polsky: It seem like she always trying to find interesting and great roles. This is our first movie, and she's done many movies, so in a way to take a risk on us is an honor.

Alan Polsky: She's definitely making choices that the respective dramatic actors make. She is trying to choose weighty material, and gravitates toward it.

HollywoodChicago.com: You both of course are brothers. What characteristics of Frank and Jerry Lee in 'Motel Life' were similar to your relationship, and how did those similarities infiltrate the way you directed the film?

Alan Polsky: There are a lot of similarities in the characters to who I am. I wouldn't say that Jerry Lee and Frank's relationship is like ours, but I would say there are different aspects, characteristics and moments in all the roles that are both part of us.

One of the exciting things about making a film about brothers together for our directorial debut is that when you're in a situation in which you have to make so many creative decisions with another person, it challenges both of us. We have to make certain compromises, but there are moments of contention and moments of extreme happiness that we're able to do this together. In telling this story, we dove into our own relationship, and it forced us to deal with issues that we have.

Gabe Polsky: Throughout the entire journey of this movie, we asked questions about ourselves and our relationship. We're both looking for the truth in those characters, and often that is in what's unsaid, but we were both trying to get there.

HollywoodChicago.com: The animated sequences have beauty, depth and a certain look to them. What type of Golden Age animation style were you emulating, and what especially did you want to communicate regarding Frank and Jerry Lee's story through the animation?

Gabe Polsky: First and foremost, we wanted the animation to come from Jerry Lee's characters. Even though Frank was telling the stories, we wanted the audience to feel that the drawings were organic to Jerry Lee. We also wanted it to feel like it came from the world that Frank and Jerry Lee were in, consistent within the art direction of the film. We met with many animators and artist, and landed on Mike Smith. He then developed the look.

Alan Polsky: It was a lot of fun as filmmakers to play around with that. Frank and Jerry Lee don't really talk that much, and in addition Gabe and I want to show more than tell. Through the animation you get to understand what is driving these guys and what their influences are.

There is a lot of nudity in the animation, but we didn't do it because we're perverts. [laughs] These guys lived in Reno, where there are strips clubs on every corner. That is their influence. Also there are gamblers, and references to there father abandoning them. All these different things help you to understand these guys – where they grew up, how they bond, what makes them laugh together and what are their personalities. We get one piece of that while they're on the run, but we also wanted to lighten it up and through the animation you get a better sense of who they are and what makes them tick.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you both were growing up, what was the connection you made during those years that morphed into the love of movies, and movie-making, and what was the first step you made as a team to become players in the industry?

Gabe Polsky: We weren't the best behaved of kids, I don't know how that relates to entertainment, but it was about being funny in class. It is about provoking a reaction on the simplest level. Our Mom's an art dealer, so we had visual arts our whole lives. That's the genesis.



Stephen Dorff and Emile Hirsch in ‘The Motel Life’
Photo credit: Polsky Films

HollywoodChicago.com: There are several ‘brother dynamic’ producing and directing teams in the film business. What makes a brother relationship evolve into a creative relationship and then into a business relationship, in your case?

Alan Polsky: When you think how brutal show business is, it’s nice to have someone you can trust in the business, and have a shorthand with – and obviously we have a similar sensibility. Our tastes are different, and moving forward we want to tell different stories. Like the brothers in the book, we have each other’s back.

Gabe Polsky: Alan and I are very different, and there are advantages and disadvantages to that. Nothing is easy when you’re partners with each other, you have to constantly work on it.

HollywoodChicago.com: The infamous film ‘Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans’ is growing in reputation and cult status. What anecdote about the journey of making that film best characterizes your experience with it?

Alan Polsky: We had a party halfway through the shooting. When we arrived, the first guy to pull me aside was Nic Cage. And he asked if I had talked to Werner [Herzog, the director]. I told him no, why? Cage said Herzog told him that he had a brilliant idea, there would be lizards in the film – a fifteen minute shot in the middle of the film just of iguanas. It will be the centerpiece of the film, he told Nic.

Well, Nic was quite taken aback, thinking the movie was about his character. He didn’t know how to react, I didn’t know what to say – Herzog does what he wants. When you think about the Bad Lieutenant, would you ever think of lizards. But in true Herzog-ian fashion, it becomes one of the most memorable parts of the movie.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was your reaction to the final cut?

Alan Polsky: It was very interesting. We obviously loved it. We just weren’t sure how people were going to react to it. We wondered how it was going to come off. It’s a very strange film. It was Cage and Herzog in New Orleans, in the middle of the summer.

HollywoodChicago.com: You have the rights to the novel, ‘Flowers for Algernon,’ which was previously put to screen. What do you think was unexplored in the first version, and at what point in the process are you at for bringing it back to the screen?

Gabe Polsky: We’re looking at Sony to produce it, Will Smith to star and we have a script. We’re in a holding pattern. We are updating the story, the world has changed, technology has changed. At its core, the main themes and conceit of the film will be similar.

HollywoodChicago.com: I’ve been asking this question at the festival. When you talk about your love for filmmaking, what’s the first thing you talk about?

Alan Polsky: It’s a really unique job, for one thing. Storytelling, using the medium of film, is an amazingly collaborative art form. You get to work with incredibly talented people in so many different areas – writers, actors, cinematographers, editor, composers – and as a director you get to co-create with them. This co-creation gives a path that makes something a bit different than what you expected by the end. In ‘The Motel Life,’ in my opinion, we made the movie we wanted to make, but it was a bit different than what we had planned, because you never know how it’s going to turn out by the end of the production.

Gabe Polsky: The point of storytelling is telling it to someone, and I enjoy when we’ve done the work and made the movie, to see how it affects movie and what they think about it. We don’t make films in a vacuum, we are telling a story, and people have to see these stories, that’s what it’s about. Are you entertaining them? Making them laugh? Are you eliciting emotion? All these things are very important and a powerful part of it all.

“The Motel Life” has a limited release, including Chicago, on November 8th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Emile Hirsch, Stephen Dorff, Dakota Fanning and Kris Kristofferson. Screenplay adapted by Micah Fitzerman-Blue and Noah Harpster. Directed by Alan and Gabe Polsky. Rated “R”



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [15]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [14]

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