

Interview: Director Adam McKay Stays Classy for ‘Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues’

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CHICAGO – The comedy juggernaut of Adam McKay and Will Ferrell is about to descend on the holiday movie season with “Anchorman 2,” the sequel to the popular first film. McKay is the behind-the-scenes partner with Ferrell, producing hilarious favorites like “Talladega Nights,” and co-founding the “Funny or Die” website.

McKay has had virtually every job in comedy, and his roots are right here in Chicago as a writer and performer. In 1990, he helped to start the Upright Citizens Brigade, which came out of Chicago’s Improv Olympics (iO), and moved from there to the mainstage cast of The Second City in 1995. He auditioned shortly thereafter for “Saturday Night Live,” and he worked as a writer there from the mid 1990s to 2001, serving as head writer for three seasons.



Adam McKay and Will Ferrell as Ron Burgundy on the Set of ‘Anchorman 2’
Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

After leaving “SNL,” he began his film partnership with Will Ferrell, and the duo produced and wrote – and McKay directed – “Anchorman,” “Talladega Nights,” “Step Brothers” and “The Other Guys.” In 2007, they started the website “Funny or Die,” which has made an immediate impact on the comedy and cultural landscape. Ferrell and McKay also co-produced the hilarious HBO series “Eastbound & Down.”

HollywoodChicago.com got to explore the mind of Adam McKay, and the virtuous comedy producer riffed on several subjects, including “Anchorman 2.”

HollywoodChicago.com: Going back to the first story meetings for ‘Anchorman 2,’ what considerations did you and Will have for making making a different movie, but with the same spirit as the first one?

Adam McKay: The big thing was it had to be advancing the story. It couldn’t just be a rehash of the first one. So we needed the next big stop, the next big change of the era, and the key was the beginnings of 24 hour news networks. As soon as we found out that took place from 1979-80 – with ESPN, MTV, CNN – we thought, oh my god, next to the invention of the television that’s the next big development in all of media. That was the key to it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Given that you’re making fun in the film of the 24 hour news channels, what do you actually find funny about the modern interpretation of the type of news right now?

McKay: Well, every time you turn on the news it’s ludicrous. I just saw one the other day, flipping around, and it was a local news thing that showed their own bloopers. On the news. There was one clip in which a reporter was scratched by a cat, and I thought, the ‘news’ is showing this.

So basically the news has no relationship with what is going on. Even NPR is really getting to the point where there is no context or solid facts. These news outlets are so focused on keeping their viewers – right wing or left wing – that they are keeping everything vague, so they don’t offend anyone. The result is we really don’t have a functioning press anymore.

HollywoodChicago.com: You went back and forth with Paramount regarding making the Anchorman sequel. Since you are on the creative side of show business, what do think you’ll never understand about the executive side, and what do you theorize they never understand about creativity?

McKay: Being an executive is a tough job. I never give the executives a hard time because what they do is so difficult. I think the very nature of the job is that they’re going to pass on some big hit movies occasionally. Even as a director I get shown scripts and I think, ‘I’m not going to do it, and it’s probably going to be a big huge hit.’ I don’t blame them for anything, they’re just doing the best they can.

The one thing they do is use a lot of computer models. They try to project results based on genre, theme and other factors. The one thing I can say is that this doesn’t work. [laughs] It doesn’t work for anything.

HollywoodChicago.com: You were a child of the 1970s, and a teenager and young adult in the ‘80s. What impression of those days are most obvious – coming from your point of view and your age in those times – in the Anchorman films?

McKay: The big difference was that in the 1970s and ‘80s the U.S. felt like one country – it was like, ‘we’re America, we’re going to do good. We’re going to improve.’ And that in no way feels like that now. [laughs] It feels like we’re about five countries now. As hokey as that sounds, it felt like in the ‘70s and ‘80s we were all asking how America was doing, as in their were differences but we were all trying to make it work. And the news back then would occasionally tell you what is going on.

HollywoodChicago.com: Going back to your Chicago comedy roots, how did your humor sensibility evolve when you moved from the group that you helped to start – The Uptight Citizens Brigade – to the more established stage at The Second City. Did they change you or did you change them?

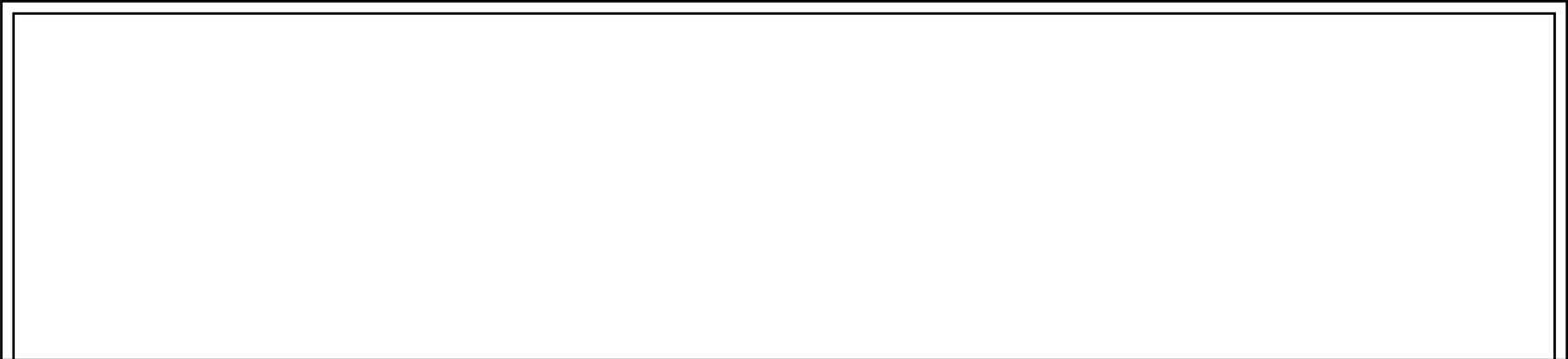
McKay: I was lucky. When I moved to The Second City, Kelly Leonard had just become artistic director, and at that time they were very open to new ideas. I was coming from training with Del Close, the Uptight Citizens Brigade and a background in long form improv. Kelly Leonard hired a ton of us who were doing that, so there was a change happening at The Second City.

We did a long form show called ‘Lois Kaz,’ and that was a cool piece. Tom Giannas was directing the Main Stage show, and he just wanted to do new stuff. It couldn’t have been a better environment to walk into. They were really open to new ideas. To this day, I still say that was one of the best experiences I’ve had creatively I’ve ever had in my life.

HollywoodChicago.com: Let’s talk a bit of specifics when you were at The Second City. One of your famous sketches was placing social critic Noam Chomsky as a kindergarten teacher. When you moved over to ‘Saturday Night Live,’ what is an example of a sketch that you wrote for them that had the same vibe?

McKay: I had a sketch in which Noam Chomsky himself had a role. It was when the digital bandwidth came into being, when networks started having multiple channels. So the premise is that there were two NBCs, one that was fluff and entertainment, and the other was pure hardcore information. I wrote it as the channel flipping between the two, from the silliest and dumbest thing you’ve even seen, to Noam Chomsky breaking down classism and imperialism. And Chomsky was just around having surgery, so his wife wouldn’t let him do it.

So we ended up getting the editor of Harper’s Magazine, Louis Lapham, to do it. Which was still pretty cool, and they put it on the air. Lapham was talking about how society criminalizes people, and if you flipped back to the other station it was doing sketches about O.J. That was pretty good, God bless Lorne Michaels for the stuff he let us do.





Will Ferrell and Adam McKay on the Set of 'Talladega Nights'
Photo credit: Columbia Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: You did three seasons as head writer on 'SNL.' What is the key advice you'd give a person in that position, since you've experienced it?

McKay: Number one, it's Lorne Michael's show. For the first year I was bucking that notion a bit, I was always trying to change things. Lorne would say this is what we do, and at one point I thought, 'what am I doing?' The guy created the show, and I'm there to help him make a great show. Within that atmosphere, you find your own voice and you do your own things. You're also trying to make the cast look really good, you try to write performance-friendly pieces. Finally, you're trying to give a point of view to the show. Those are the three jobs of it. Once I figured that out, it got a lot easier and I was more relaxed.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did you get the news that you were going to be head writer, did Lorne just call you?

McKay: Steve Higgins, the producer of the show, told me. At first I said, 'What!?!,' because I'd only been a staff writer for one year. But they thought out of all of them, that I could do it. I thought, 'Holy sh*t!' I actually had to think about it, because I was so freaked out. I asked my manager, should I do it? And his two word reply, 'F**k yeah!' [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: You and Will Ferrell use your comedy as a Trojan Horse at times against the right wing of political theater, disguising your commentary with highly charged comic characters. Do you ever received direct threats or criticisms when you go after this type of powerful concerns like the Bush family, or regarding the film 'The Campaign,' the [right wing] Koch brothers?

McKay: I've gotten a few crazy threats on Twitter from some pretty scary folk – which you see a lot on those forums – but what we do is pretty silly and I think they know it's satire and comedy. Believe me, if I had a direct road to something like the Securities and Exchange Commission and could start an investigation, perhaps I'd get more threats. But we're just goofballs, and I don't think they care.

There were a few responses – apparently the Koch brothers, through their spokesperson, did say something about 'The Campaign,' mainly because Zach Galifianakis called them creepy. We also had John McCain respond to a 'Funny or Die' video, but for the most part they ignore us.

HollywoodChicago.com: Speaking of the revolution of your website 'Funny or Die,' what do you think is the slippery slope for a comedian when so much funny material is on the web. Do we lose a sense of mystery about comics and comic personas when so much is out there?

McKay: You probably could ask that question every decade. When you look at the content out there in the 1880s, there was maybe one bit every year and a half – and then vaudeville and the movies come along. [laughs] Here's the thing, the best ideas are the ones that rise to the surface. If you took all 300 million people in this country, and forced them by gunpoint to write a sketch every year, you'd still find that best stuff shines. Ultimately it doesn't matter, and I think it's healthy that more people have access to the technology that produces film and music.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've reached a level of financial gain that I'm sure even overwhelms you. What have you learned about the power – and misgivings – of money at the level you've achieved?

McKay: I don't mind answering that, because first off I'm not worth what you think. [laughs] There are websites that report figures that are three times what I actually have, and that's wrong. They think that I pay no taxes or have no agents or infrastructure that I have to take care of. But that being said, I am worth a crazy amount given what I do, and I do know that teachers and nurses should make more. I'm also incredible lucky.

The key for me is that it’s never been about the money, I just love what I do. I’ve read that once you can pay your rent and medical bills, that money doesn’t correlate to happiness at all. The only time it keeps having an impact on happiness is when you give a lot to charity. That would be my advice to anybody that makes a windfall – give a bunch of it away.

“Anchorman 2” opens everywhere on December 18th. Featuring Will Ferrell, Steve Carrell, Paul Rudd, Kirsten Wiig, David Koechner, Christina Applegate, Vince Vaughn, James Marsden, Fred Willard and Harrison Ford. Screenplay by Adam McKay and Will Ferrell. Directed by Adam McKay. Rated “PG-13”



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