

Interview: Jason Schwartzman Hears All in ‘Listen Up Philip’

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- [Elisabeth Moss](#) [2]
- [Francis Ford Coppola](#) [3]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [4]
- [Interview](#) [5]
- [Jason Schwartzman](#) [6]
- [Jess Weixler](#) [7]
- [Jonathan Pryce](#) [8]
- [Joséphine de La Baume](#) [9]
- [Krysten Ritter](#) [10]
- [Listen Up Philip](#) [11]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [12]
- [Richard Sherman](#) [13]
- [Rushmore](#) [14]
- [Saving Mr. Banks](#) [15]
- [Talia Shire](#) [16]
- [Tribeca Film](#) [17]
- [Wes Anderson](#) [18]

CHICAGO – Jason Schwartzman likes to portray writers – he was one in his HBO series “Bored to Death” – and he portrays one in his latest film, “Listen Up Philip.” He also has played many characters in director Wes Anderson’s universe, and did a fantastic turn as composer Richard M. Sherman in last year’s “Saving Mr. Banks.”

The laconic and dryly witty Schwartzman was born in Los Angeles, the son of actress Talia Shire (Adrian in “Rocky” and director Francis Ford Coppola’s sister) and producer Jack Schwartzman. He was discovered at age 17 by director Anderson, when he starred in the cult epic, “Rushmore” (1998). He has continued in the Anderson acting company, also starring in “The Darjeeling Limited,” “Fantastic Mr. Fox,” “Moonrise Kingdom” and “The Grand Budapest Hotel” for the director. He’s also done memorable work in “I Heart Huckabees,” “Funny People” and “Scott Pilgrim vs. the World.”



Jason Schwartzman and Elisabeth Moss in ‘Listen Up Philip’

Photo credit: Tribeca Film

Schwartzman plays the title role in “Listen Up Philip” – written and directed by Alex Ross Perry – as a writer with a darker personality than his character in “Bored to Death.” Philip is a full of angst as his second novel is about to be published, and he takes solace not in his live-in girlfriend (Elisabeth Moss), but an older, burnt-out writer named Zimmerman (Jonathan Pryce). This conflict steers his life for several months, until the experience provides fuel for his art.

HollywoodChicago.com talked to Schwartzman last week, as his film opened in Chicago. “Listen Up Philip” is also available online, at the popular sites VUDU, Google Play and Amazon. Schwartzman was enthusiastic, virtuous and engaged in the interview, counter to the brooding

character of Philip.

HollywoodChicago.com: It's important for the character of Philip to maintain a certain direction in the film. What characteristic did you want to make sure came through in maintaining that direction?

Jason Schwartzman: One in particular is he never exhibited signs of backing off from his behavior, or tried to patch it up with people close to him. Alex and I would talk about the beginning of the film, where the narrator told us that this behavior is new to Philip. So we were thinking that Philip was experimenting with coldness and directness almost like a drug.

After using this behavior on some former friends, he's actually buoyant, and I think that is the start of his mishandling of these emotions and his becoming narcissistic to a fault. By the end, I don't think he knew he'd become addicted to that behavior.

HollywoodChicago.com: Were there any other books, plays or movies that mirrored what you were doing with the character of Philip?

Schwartzman: This will sound strange, but "American Gigolo." In the beginning, Richard Gere's character is riding in a convertible and feeling good, but by the end he's behind bars. I saw a similarity in Philip, in the beginning on the cusp of releasing his second novel and by the end locked out of his own house. This emotional journey has no arc or trajectory, it's just relentless.

In rehearsals, Alex and I talked about adding some jokes or a scene of sympathy for Philip, but that just made him seem passive aggressive. The main characteristic for him became his directness, and the other was that he was disappointed by people. He has impossibly high standards for his relationships, and he never let anybody off the hook.

HollywoodChicago.com: Philip is also a eunuch in a harem. Women adore him for his art, but he can't seem to consummate. Where do you think his sexual energy has gone?

Schwartzman: Philip has an idea of how he wants to be perceived, and he won't let anyone in, and anything that is to be known in exploring him deeply will simply never be known.

HollywoodChicago.com: Philip is a romantic archetype of the angst, joylessness and solitude of the 'famous reclusive author.' Did you have a real author in mind to help you create Philip, and how did that author influence the character?

Schwartzman: He's his own kind of character. When people ask that question, I usually say 'I based him on Philip.' He's such a singular character. But in terms of his personality or history, there is no one in particular. When he reveals something very personal in the film, to me it's a clue that he is a 'diagrams and numbers' writer, and not autobiographical.



Jason Schwartzman in 'Rushmore'
Photo credit: The Criterion Collection

HollywoodChicago.com: Philip seems to be a living embodiment of the old saying 'the thing that makes you great also has the power to destroy you.' Since there is an offscreen narrator who tells us of his eventual fate, how do you think Philip would be remembered after he was gone in our current culture ... as a great novelist or a sad loner, and why?

Schwartzman: Probably both. He decided he wanted to be a novelist at age 14, mapping out things like publishing, moving to New York City and having torrid love affairs...and he was going to be alone. He grew up without parents, and people like that are always looking for someone to learn from and worship. He'll probably be remembered as a good novelist who nobody ever really knew personally.

HollywoodChicago.com: What does Wes Anderson give you as a performer that both created your “brand” and allowed you to evolve as an actor?

Schwartzman: I think a lot of it had to do with our ages at the time we met. I was 17 years old and he was 27. He definitely is a mentor, and there is always that person that comes along at the right time in your life, and steers you in the direction you need to go, and that was Wes. He was the kind of guy that turned me onto the French New Wave cinema and grittier American films.

When I got the script for ‘Rushmore’ I remember reading it and thinking ‘this is exactly what I think is funny.’ I never realized it until then, and never knew that someone could articulate it so well. I remember thinking I wasn’t going to get the part in the film, but I couldn’t wait to see it. To this day, he makes me laugh. I don’t know how it ‘shaped’ me, but I’m with my friend, and we’re brothers in arms.

HollywoodChicago.com: At what point in your life did you realize that your mother was a classic movie star and that you had a heritage of filmmaking on her side of the family, and how did that revelation change the outlook of what you eventually ended up doing?

Schwartzman: We weren’t really ‘movie people’ when I was growing up, we’d go to the movies as a family, but would see the mainstream stuff. My memories of my family is not sitting and talking about movies per se, it was more about the boisterous loudness of the clan, singing and cooking.

HollywoodChicago.com: Even though you grew up in a mixed marriage household, and I read that you grew up with no religion, you tend in your characters to identify with your father’s Jewish roots. How do you think that side of yourself defines your life’s outlook, and what traits come through regarding the Catholic side of the equation?

Schwartzman: My parents would probably hate the part about no religion, because we would do Christmas and Chanukah, and Passover, but more of the traditions rather than the religion itself. There is beauty and tradition in the Jewish and Catholic faiths, and the idea that families come together over those traditions, in the act of unifying people over something positive, that is a great thing.

As far as the Catholic side, my mother is into the ceremony, and is a deeply spiritual person. I always been told that you always need something to believe in, because that is what saves you in the end, the belief in something bigger. I definitely feel that in our lives, if we’re feeling low or depressed, a beautiful piece of music or a great performance or even a news story that makes you cry is amazing. That is what I know.

HollywoodChicago.com: How strange was it for you to live in another era for time while portraying Richard Sherman in ‘Saving Mr. Banks’? So much of the energy of the film comes from the two brothers, what do you admire about their songwriting skills, as a musician yourself?



Jason Schwartzman in Chicago, October 24, 2014
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Schwartzman: For me, that film was not only a chance to work on a great story, but Richard Sherman is still alive and I got to go to his house and learn how to play the songs as he played them. It was a master class in songwriting. When we were together he’d walked me through not just the chords, but the way he manipulated those chords within the song. There are only a few of those guys left, so on a musical level it was a dork session. [laughs]

The first time we got together he wanted to know what type of music I was into and could play. The first song I performed for him was The Beatles song, ‘Your Mother Should Know.’ He was blown away by that, and afterward we just kept exchanging different songs that went on for hours. I apologized for dorking out, but he said that he could dork out like that for the entire day.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did he influence the production once you started filming?

Schwartzman: During the ‘Let’s Go Fly a Kite’ scene, he did a great thing. He sat at the piano and played it, and everybody started singing along. I mean everybody, like big muscle-bound crew members with tears in their eyes. And it was amazing and emotional.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve done so many classic and cult films over the years. If someone was to find a collection of them and a working DVD player 200 years from now, which film do you think they will keep watching the most and why?

Schwartzman: I don’t know. I would hope it would be the films of somebody else. [laughs]

“Listen Up Philip” continues its limited release in Chicago on October 24th, and is available on VUDU, Google Play and Amazon. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Jason Schwartzman, Elisabeth Moss, Jonathan Pryce, Joséphine de La Baume, Jess Weixler and Krysten Ritter. Written and directed by Alex Ross Perry. Not Rated.



[19]

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