

Interview: Actor David Dastmalchian on His Remarkable Film ‘Animals’

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CHICAGO – Sometimes you just need a break, that small window of opportunity to burst through and make the mark. Actor David Dastmalchian knows all about that phenomenon, as he produced and starred in his semi-autobiographical film “Animals,” and got the break of a lifetime landing a role in the film, “The Dark Knight.”

Dastmalchian is a consummate and enthusiastic gentleman, a performer who works hard, but has a humble and appealing attitude of gratitude. His star is ascending further this summer as he scored another role in a superhero epic, this time for Marvel Films, alongside Paul Rudd in “Ant-Man.” David Dastmalchian and director Collin Schiffli will also make a Chicago appearance this week (Friday, May 22nd, 2015) for the Chicago Opening Night screening of “Animals,” part of a limited nationwide release. [Click here](#) [17] for details and ticket purchasing information for the Chicago screening.



David Dastmalchian of ‘Animals’ at the 2014 Chicago Critics Film Festival

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Dastmalchian was raised in Kansas, but came to Chicago to study acting at The Theatre School at DePaul University. As he moved through a series of jobs after college, he also struggled with addiction (he’s now recovered), a period of life that is chronicled in the fictional screenplay of “Animals,” which he wrote and stars in. He relates the story of his break in “The Dark Knight” further down the interview (a must read), and talked to HollywoodChicago.com at length about the philosophy of his work, and his brilliant and rising career.

HollywoodChicago.com: ‘Animals’ is based in part on your own struggles with addiction. What physical or mental element of addiction did you want to communicate in the film, that you don’t think anyone else had thought about when portraying such characters?

David Dastmalchian: I think something that I wanted to bring to the screen was the potential for hope. I don’t think that has been portrayed before. We were aware, when we began the film, that the subject matter had been dealt with before, and was pretty well covered. As far as opiate or heroin addiction, it is said that in real life that odds are stacked against a heroin addict making a complete recovery, which I was told hundreds of times when I was trying to get clean.

It has been portrayed accurately in a number of films, that things don’t end well for the heroin addict, – in ‘Trainspotting’ and ‘Drugstore Cowboy,’ for example. But in my case, I’m a happy ending. After that part of the battle in my life, I found a great deal of happiness, and found my way to a clean life. It was important for us to showcase that hope, but not in a way that it was one-meeting-and-then-clean. In any addiction, there is no easy bandage, and society is still trying to have a conversation on how we deal with this subject. So I wanted to tell a story of hope, and how people need each other to get better.

HollywoodChicago.com: Chicago was a more bitter backdrop in the circumstances of your character. Besides the neighborhoods that are

like shooting galleries, what in your opinion are some of the hidden scars of the Windy City, that you and Collin tried to communicate in the film?

Dastmalchian: It’s interesting for me now, having been away from Chicago for a number of years, and having been away from the westside neighborhood that I generally bought drugs at in the late 1990s, to observe that maybe those scars are healing as those neighborhoods get better.

I drove Collin around to show him the locations at the time of the filming, including the spot where I primarily bought the drugs, and it was still there at that time. The area is a bubble. There is this beautiful and creeping gentrification of the West Loop, a bucolic suburb to the north and the UIC campus to the south. But the racial and economic divide of Chicago is still present, and still oppressive in that small area.

HollywoodChicago.com: You told me last year that your screenplay took many years to get right. How tight was the screenplay for ‘Animals’ at the time of production, and what adjustments were you and Collin making once the script was on its feet and actually being performed?

Dastmalchian: We were adjusting constantly. For me, I was still learning how to write screenplays. I entered the process understanding that learning curve. And I knew enough about movie sets to understand that openness is necessary on any given day. I wanted to make sure that Collin and everyone else associated with the production would understand that I wouldn’t be looming over them with a ‘golden crop,’ and guarding my precious words. [laughs]

When we first started rehearsing together, my instruction to everyone was there was no right way to say how the words in the script were. I told them to say it in the way that felt right for them. It was like I just laid out a map for everyone, and then allowed them to elevate the words in the direction that worked. As a writer, I get all the credit for ‘writing the screenplay,’ but when you watch the final film – based on the 72nd draft of my screenplay, by the way – it’s about the ideas that Collin and everyone else put into it.



Collin Schiffli (left) and David Dastmalchian on the set of ‘Animals’

Photo credit: Schiffli Films

HollywoodChicago.com: Was the expression of your film a sort of call for redemption, from all of the people you encountered during your actual addiction. Does Woody Allen’s assertion that ‘we do art because we can’t get it right in real life’ apply to your character of Jude, versus your real life of David?

Dastmalchian: Sure, definitely, that was part of it. In my real life journey, I’m actually much more Bobbie [the female character] then I was Jude. There were elements in my past that had an impact on the Jude you see on the screen, but there was also – as part of my personal arc with the situation – choices I had to make in my personal life that was closer to Bobbie.

If I achieve anything with this, it’s that an audience can sit there, and wonder about the guy they past on the sidewalk, who looks like Jude and Bobbie, or even worse. And when they walk out of the film, they well realize that these street people are brothers, sisters, sons and daughters. Everyone has the potential to be anything in the future, but it’s so easy to let them go, if they’re in a present addictive state. We need to find some way to reach out and grab them, and pull them back. There is redemption.

HollywoodChicago.com: There was such a long journey for ‘Animals’ from first tap on the keyboard for you in to the current release. In that long process, at what point did you and Collin find the most difficulty, and what advice would you give to young filmmakers to avoid that difficulty that you faced?

Dastmalchian: The first tap, as you indicated, was 2006. The most difficult point in the process is a tie, if I may. [laughs] I equate the whole process to a 20 round boxing match, there was never anything relatively easy in the process. One of those difficulties was financing, with no connections to movie stars or a highly commercial script. You have to deliver the goods, man. But that difficulty did turn out to be an necessary part of the evolution of the film.

We put together a business plan, just like we were opening a restaurant or starting a shop. We had read that Joel and Ethan Coen, when they made their film 'Blood Simple,' that they went with a suitcase presentation to dentists, entrepreneurs and other small businessmen. We did it in a digital sense, with Collin putting together a beautiful pitch, and went out there soliciting.

HollywoodChicago.com: Financing ALWAYS seems to be 'on the list.' What was the other difficulty?

Dastmalchian: The other one is 'jumping off the diving board.' There is never a time in the production process where all the ducks are in a row. But you reach a certain time in the journey where you have to take a leap of faith, and start the cameras rolling. Without final money or everything in place, we set a date and started it going.

So my note to young filmmakers, when you're out there pitching for money – we got told 'no' so many times – is to refine the pitch, look at our business plan, and listen to your potential investor feedback. We got to the point where we could sit across somebody at their kitchen table, and tell them what the movie was about, and why it was important to invest. The direct and honest way was the best, and it took a lot of pitches for it to start to click. It also forced us to 'know' what we eventually did, before one shot was done.

HollywoodChicago.com: The launch of 'Ant-Man' was not without controversy. How does a director switch [Edgar Wright to Peyton Reed] and the infamous 'creative differences' assertion affect a cast trying to get their feet wet in the complex world of superhero films?

Dastmalchian: I can only speak in my point of view – it's totally selfish. I was worried that one director had cast me in the film, and the new director was going to let me go, because there was nothing contractually in place for a new director to keep me. I was good with the old director, I had auditioned for him, and I was looking forward to working with him. So when he left the picture, I was at the point where I just had my first child, I went from cloud nine to a bundle of nerves. I had a job, but there were other cast changes, so what was going to happen?

So I waited. I got the call that I was going down to Atlanta to meet up with him. It's a funny story, because they told me I was going to 'test,' which I took to meant I was going to test for the role again with the new director. It gave me a stomach ache. [laughs] I get down there, and I'm sitting in this very nice office with Paul Rudd and the rest of the principals, the producers and new director. I realized it was for the camera tests, and it was a 'welcome aboard' moment. It was a weird way to realize that I finally, with 100 percent certainty, had the job.



David Dastmalchian in a Promo for the Upcoming 'Ant-Man'

Photo credit: Walt Disney Motion Picture Studios

HollywoodChicago.com: Paul Rudd is a champion of smaller and more personal films – I'm thinking 'Prince Avalanche' and 'They Came Together' – did you ever get a chance to talk about choices he's made in his career, and how that has affected him as a performer?

Dastmalchian: We didn't talk about that specifically. We did talk about the indie films he's done, because I'm just a fan. Paul loves to tell stories, he loves to entertain people, and that goes for the biggest projects all the way down to the more risky and smaller films. The big highlight for me, and this just happened the other day. He came up to me and said, 'I just saw the 'Animals' trailer, and it was great!' That's a perfect example of the type of guy he is.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've done a lot of stage work. Given your brand reputation as sort of a darker character, which role would people be surprised to learn you've played on stage, and how are the elements of that character part of your performance personality?

Dastmalchian: I will go with Tom Wingfield in 'The Glass Menagerie.' He's pretty dark, but it gave me a moment because it was a role I never thought I'd have an opportunity to play. I used to think I knew where I 'fit' with my type, but that was something outside of it.

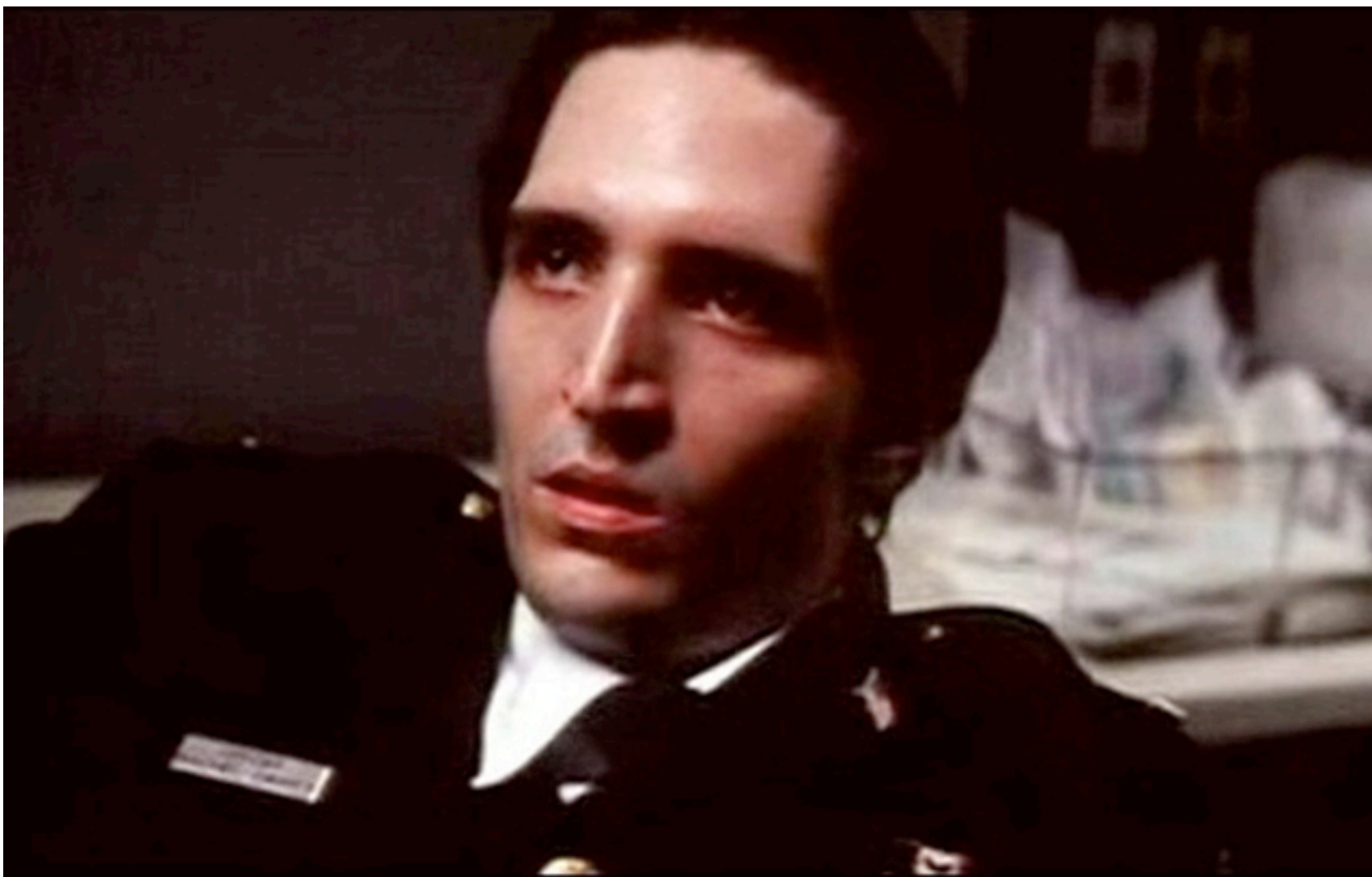
Maybe a better example would be some of the family theater I've done, for a friend of mine who recruits high level people to do theater presentations for different social and economic levels. It's a 'Shakespeare for Children' series, and it's as if you put Shakespeare in a

blender and combined it with 'Pee-Wee's Playhouse.' And I played this version of Claudius in 'Hamlet' which was like Russell Brand with a beauty mark, and a tee-shirt that read 'Proud to be Awesome.' [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Speaking of brand personality, what do you find strange about this point in your career as far as 'selling yourself as a brand.' To borrow a phrase from 'A Chorus Line,' are some of those branding circumstances 'a picture of a person you don't know'?

Dastmalchian: [Laughs] That's my job, man! I'm an entertainer, and I love that part of it. I am whoever you need be to be. From the path to the writer, the producer and the director, I am whoever they need me to be. It's about where you need me to be the character, how you need be to be the character, and how efficiently you need me to be the character. That is the wonderful part of being an actor.

I'm at a place right where I'm trying to just do the best I can with the audition opportunities I have. Especially when it's material I connect to, because people are starting to give me opportunities I hadn't had before, and 'Ant-Man' is an another example of that phenomenon. The 'brand,' in a strange way, can create itself as well.



David Dastmalchian in 'The Dark Knight'

Photo credit: Warner Home Video

HollywoodChicago.com: Your first film role was famously in 'The Dark Knight,' Tell us about the audition process, and how did the role propel you to other opportunities?

Dastmalchian: I was doing 'Othello' at the Writer's Theater in Glencoe, Illinois. It was really a dream production. Just at the time I sat down for the table read of that play, I auditioned for 'The Dark Knight' for the role of the Joker's henchman at the bank robbing scene, in the beginning of the film. I was called back to the director [Christopher Nolan], and he was quiet and kind, and I read the dialogue. And that was that, I went back to rehearsals for the play.

I read in the newspaper a couple weeks later that they'd already shot the bank heist scene, and I was kind of devastated, because I'd been a comic book fan all my life and The Joker was a favorite. I just licked my wounds, and went back to my project, and worked on it for the next four months.

HollywoodChicago.com: So it was a situation where they called you back?

Dastmalchian: Yeah, the show had closed, and I was in that working actor situation where I didn't know what my next project or paycheck would be. I was sitting on my futon in my little apartment in Uptown in Chicago, and the call came. My agent said, 'Do you have a passport?' And I said, 'no, why?' And it came back that 'the Batman people have a role they want you for, as somebody who works for The Joker, but you'll need a passport because you're probably going to do pickup shots in London.'

I didn't walk, I sprinted to the post office, tears of joy in my eyes. [laughs] I went to somebody I knew who worked there, and asked, 'how do I get a passport in the fastest way possible?' She figured it out for me, and I had to borrow 50 bucks from a friend to process it, but the rest is cinema history.

HollywoodChicago.com: That's one of the greatest getting-the-part stories I've ever heard!

Dastmalchian: Yeah, and man they were so secretive. I didn't know what I was doing all the way up to the costume fittings. Chris just trusted me, with a wonderful role. I love the sleight-of-hand in story telling, where the audience finds out the character is doing one thing, and turns out

to be the other. I’m very grateful to say that my first film was ‘The Dark Knight.’

HollywoodChicago.com: In the modern film world, it’s like being in ‘Casablanca.’

Dastmalchian: When I got home, after working around Heath Ledger for a couple weeks, I said – somewhat fatalistically – ‘I just spent a couple weeks with James Dean’ – because he was that cool, he was that magnanimous, and so goddamn sweet. For instance, I had no idea how to handle one of the rifles I had to use, and he spent all this time teaching me how to use it, while in The Joker get up. I just wanted to touch him while he was in character, as he was just talking about about bands and music.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is ironic to me, is that you knew that pain he seemed to keep a secret.

Dastmalchian: Yeah, and I usually have a great radar for it. I’ve been on the el, and looked over and thought, ‘there is a user.’ With Heath, I even joked that when I heard he got The Joker role, that it was ‘really bad casting.’ He replied, ‘Me too!’ [laughs] Then I asked him whether he was having fun. And he simply said, ‘I’m having the time of my life.’

HollywoodChicago.com: Thanks for telling that beautiful story. So finally, if you were basing another film on your life, post addiction, what element of that character would you like to show the world, to honestly communicate who you are today?

Dastmalchian: It would be the most boring movie to any audience right now. [laughs] But to me, I would watch it around the clock. I’m in a state of bliss right now – as I work with my heroes, from the best of indie films to the biggest of studio films, and I’m spending all of my time with my wife, who has taught me the true meaning of love. My wife has never had a cigarette, or a drink, but completely understands me. ‘Animals’ is about love, with addiction in the background, and I hope the audience sees it primarily as a love story.

Because I spend everyday with my wife, and she is the greatest gift I’ve ever gotten in my life, next to my son. As an actor, I have the incredible gift of time. I get to write again, as I go from meetings to being with my family at the park. We can be together, and they are my rock. We’ve been everywhere this year, and it’s been awesome. So yes, that movie would be boring to anyone else but me, but I love it.

The Gene Siskel Film Center – 164 North State Street, Chicago – Presents “Animals” on May 22nd, 2015, with appearances by David Dastmalchian and director Collin Schiffli. [Click here](#) [17] for details and ticket purchasing information. “Animals” features David Dastmalchian, Kim Shaw and John Heard, with a limited release throughout the country. See local listings for theaters and show times. Written by David Dastmalchian. Directed by Collin Schiffli. Rated “R”



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