Interviews: Director, Cast of ‘Mind Over Mindy’ Has Chicago Gala Screening on Sept. 19, 2015

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CHICAGO – Director Robert Alaniz is a throwback to the maverick film director that completes his projects through hell or low budget. His latest film is his seventh as writer/director, called “Mind Over Mindy.” Larry Thomas – who portrayed the “Soup Nazi” on “Seinfeld” – is part of the cast that will join Alaniz at a Chicago Gala Screening of the film at the northwest side’s historic Patio Theater on September 19th, 2015.

“Mind Over Mindy” is a fantasy comedy, concerning a man named Tom (Steve Parks) who is engaged to be married, but obsesses so much about his 1989 high school girlfriend Mindy (Catherine McCafferty) that she appears in the present. The film also features Larry Thomas as a schizophrenic psychiatrist, and Jim O’Heir from “Parks and Recreation” as Tom’s car dealer boss.

Steve Parks and Catherine McCafferty in a Scene from Robert Alaniz’s ‘Mind Over Mindy’
Photo credit: Sole Productions

Director Robert Alaniz, plus actors Larry Thomas and Catherine McCafferty, talked by phone to HollywoodChicago.com, in anticipation of the Chicago Gala Screening of “Mind Over Mindy.”

Larry Thomas, “The Soup Nazi” from TV’s “Seinfeld,” in “Mind Over Mindy”

HollywoodChicago.com: You once told me that the part that you have in ‘Mind Over Mindy’ had its origins in a conversation between you and director Robert Alaniz. What was that conversation, and how was it expanded in the final film?

Larry Thomas: The original conversation was pretty simple. Robert wanted to write a character of a psychiatrist that shouldn’t be in practice. It was that loose. My first thought was that he’s simply neurotic, like a Woody Allen, but Robert gave him a specific condition – and made him schizophrenic. I thought that was funny, and was cinematic, a guy with two personalities going back and forth. And as it was written, his patient Tom would never be looking when the switch occurred.

We filmed an early promo to test the character, and then when I came back to film the movie I had an epiphany about the role on the plane between Los Angeles and Chicago. I used to know a kid when I was in sixth grade, who was so bad he changed my life. He was evil, intent on being evil, and I remembered he had a nasty, sarcastic way of talking out of the side of his mouth, to show his disdain. I thought that would be perfect for my ‘other’ personality for Dr. Fischer.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the deeper meaning and attitude behind such a character?

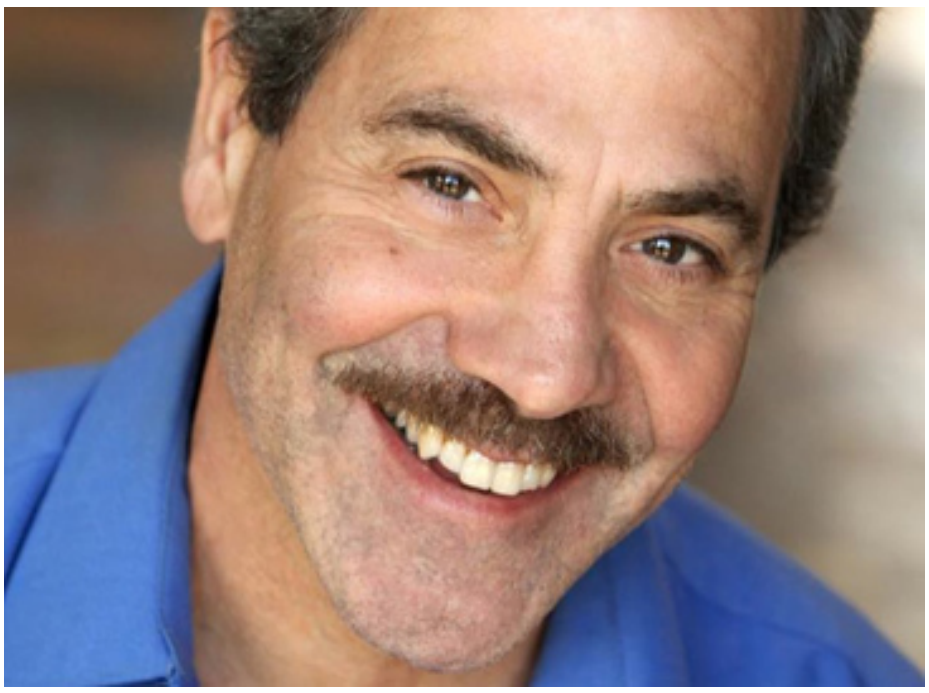
Thomas: Well, he’s a psychiatrist that thinks he has a total handle on his own psyche. I find that people who study psychology always think they have the answer to everything, but they are fraught with the same problems that everyone has. So I thought that maybe Dr. Fischer thinks he had to be so good, and so balanced, when he does get angry he can’t bring it up himself, so he goes into another personality to compensate. That’s how I justified his personality.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is your second feature with Robert Alaniz, after ‘You Don’t Say!’ What is comfortable about your relationship with him as a collaborator, and what kind of latitude does he give you in creating characters?

Thomas: Robert has a great sense of humor and irony. I like his ideas. ‘Mind Over Mindy’ is such a lovely idea, because it touches the romantic side of everyone. And the irony is perfectly in a character that is a psychiatrist who shouldn’t be a psychiatrist.

In regards to the latitude you mentioned, it’s great to have enough years in the field that when a guy like Robert comes along, his assumption for me in creating the character is that I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t know what I was doing. ‘Mindy’ is Robert’s idea, it’s my job to execute it. He’s great at saying, ‘that’s great, and how about this?’ We added some wrinkles to the character, and I think he’s even funnier than when he was first written.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve described yourself as a pure character actor, and have many diverse roles in your resume. As that type of actor, what do you love about taking on the persona of a different life then your own?



Larry Thomas of ‘Mind Over Mindy’
Photo credit: Larry Thomas

Thomas: We all naturally gravitate to what we eventually do, and then at the end of our lives maybe we think, ‘ah, that’s why I did that!’ [laughs] I think why I gravitated to being a character actor, is that I was very insecure myself. I think that when I get to portray a character that is different than who I am, it allows me to be someone else without reservations.

When you play a character, you get to fulfill that space without reservations. If the character is bad, that’s okay. because that’s how he’s written. Here’s something women outside the business ask of me, ‘so are you acting with me right now?’ Which brings up a good point, everybody is acting with everybody all the time. You can’t go around telling people what you really think, you’d have no friends. [laughs] So I tell people when I’m acting, that’s the only time I get to be honest. Actors are lucky to get the chance to be themselves, through that honesty.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did you apply that to your most famous role?

Thomas: People always tell me I’m such a nice guy, so how did I play someone like the Soup Nazi? Well, I say that there is a lot more Soup Nazi in me than you want to believe. I can totally be that angry guy that tells everyone to screw off, but of course I can do that all the time because most people don’t deserve it. What made it so easy on that ‘Seinfeld’ episode, is those guys totally deserved it. [laughs] I went into that character knowing I wasn’t the bad person for throwing them out, they’re the bad people.

Writer/Director Robert Alaniz of “Mind Over Mindy”

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the origin of this very unique idea? What event or revelation was the genesis of the movie?

Robert Alaniz: Like most of my recent comedies, they spawn off events in my personal life that bother or trouble me. I’m able to find the humor in it, or the strangeness of it. My last film, ‘You Don’t Say!,’ was in part about my frustration that I couldn’t say what I actually thought in some cases, and how it takes away our individuality.

‘Mind Over Mindy’ came out of something that happened between me and my wife. I broke up with a girl when I was 18 years old, and it really upset me, almost leading to suicide. I didn’t have any self respect or dignity in that situation. Subsequently, I would dream about her occasionally, and she would apologize to me in those dreams. We’d start to get deeper, but I would always wake up before it came to any conclusion.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did your wife play into that?

Alaniz: I’d tell her about the dreams, and she’d ask, ‘are you ever going to get over that?’ She would add that it was lucky that the obsession didn’t get between me and the other women I’d been involved with, including her. So it became about making this situation into an interesting movie, what if that girl came back today, and was the same age?

I also wanted to write something that everyone could identify with, and I think everyone identifies with the ‘one that got away.’ Was that the right person? And most importantly, how living in the past messes with your future, you’ve got to move on and live with your decisions.

HollywoodChicago.com: You obviously needed that perfect Mindy character, given that she is a figment of an imagination. What did you find in Catherine McCafferty that you didn’t see in other auditions?

Alaniz: Catherine was one of the first actresses we saw, and she had a ‘little girl’ quality that was the Mindy in my head, what she should look like and who she should be. When we did callbacks, Catherine was doing something else and wasn’t available, but we still weren’t settled on the other actress we had chosen. My co-producer suggested we bring Catherine back, and when she returned she just knocked it out of the park. She had the two elements we were looking for – a great allure and that girl-next-door sweet quality.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is your second collaboration with Larry Thomas. What does he bring to the character of Dr. Fischer that you think is truly his own spin, that nobody else can do?

Alaniz: As I said before, I pitched Larry the idea of ‘Mind Over Mindy,’ and I wanted to create a psychiatrist character based on the old George Carlin line, ‘…based on the law of averages, there are good doctors and bad doctors, and the bad news is one of you have an appointment with a bad doctor tomorrow.’ That joke carried through to the Dr. Fischer character, what if he had as many problems as his patients?

So it came to pass that Dr. Fischer ended up being schizophrenic, having a dual personality, so when you go to see him you don’t know what person you’re going to get. Larry worked on it from the script, and the great thing about him really goes back to that Soup Nazi character, with that very stern look, but he also has a very serene and peaceful look as well. He switched between those looks, and it worked out well. He told me he put himself out there, and to him it seemed to work.

HollywoodChicago.com: You are making commentary regarding psychiatry, nostalgia, fantasy and you-can’t-always-get-what-you-want. Which of these four themes struck you as one that you wrestle with the most when you were writing the script?

Director Robert Alaniz of ‘Mind Over Mindy’
Photo credit: Sole Productions

Alaniz: I have to combine those, all the elements exist in the movie. The one I had the hardest time with was nostalgia. Mindy comes from

Tom’s mind, but still has a basis in 1989. She has no knowledge of what is going on in the 21st Century. She is like Marty McFly from ‘Back to the Future,’ and the sequel actually came out in 1989.

HollywoodChicago.com: You are a true independent producer, director and writer. What part of the process of making a movie would you advise to most closely monitor and why, given your experience in being within every step of the process?

Alaniz: After seven films, it’s the script. The script is everything. You could have the greatest of everything, and millions of dollars, but few scripts have a unique quality. It’s probably because there are too many cooks, but as an independent writer/director, my challenge is to come up with something that will appeal to an audience. It’s a business as well as an art, and it can’t be home movies, it has to find an audience.

HollywoodChicago.com: Can you think of one scene in one of your films, that best describes you personally. Is there a scene that defines you as such?

Alaniz: There is a piece of me, of course, in all of them. The one film I relate most to is ‘D.I.N.K.s,’ which means Double Income, No Kids. The Richard Brooks character in the film was me, who was a freelance writer going nowhere, until he started writing about things that really bothered him, and suddenly he got recognition. There were so many scenes in that film is that I can identify with, and there is more of me in ‘D.I.N.K.s,’ than any other film.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is your feeling about ‘Mind Over Mindy,’ now that its finally completed?

Alaniz: As an independent filmmaker, I think I’ve achieved the best film I’ve ever made. The quality is there, the film was shot on a ‘RED’ camera with a more experienced crew, on a very small budget, but it looks great. It’s a funny film, with people relating to the lost love and living in the past angle, and it appeals to people who like nostalgia for the 1980s. If you like the combination of nostalgia, fantasy and romantic comedy, then you’ll love this film.

Actress Catherine McCafferty, Portrays Mindy in “Mind Over Mindy”

HollywoodChicago.com: What particular quirk do you bring to the character of Mindy, that you think got you the part in the first place? What do you like about her best?

Catherine McCafferty: Well, first, this is my first lead role in a feature film. I think Mindy’s newness is a real newness as well, and something that came naturally from inside of me. I came from a theater background, and had done some short films, but came in to my first lead role bright eyed and bushy tailed, just like that character of Mindy.

HollywoodChicago.com: When portraying a figment of someone’s imagination, especially someone from the past, what do you personally think you need to be mindful of, in the way the character is in every scene?

McCafferty: The character was very dear to Robert, so finding a balance artistically with your own performance is difficult when you’re portraying someone who was real to the writer and director. Open communication was key to achieving that balance.

HollywoodChicago.com: How much easier is it to be on a film in which the director has written it as well? Is there more of an opportunity for improvisation, and how was the experience with Robert Alaniz?

McCafferty: He was open to doing something different, once he covered what he wanted in every scene. We could try something, and he was willing to do it.

HollywoodChicago.com: You are just starting out as an actress. What is the best advice you could give somebody now about the experience, if there are just starting out, since you’ve done auditions and cattle calls?

Catherine McCafferty of ‘Mind Over Mindy’
Photo credit: Catherine McCafferty

McCafferty: Again, because I come from a theater background, that helps tremendously, because I've done so many different styles of performance. If you are starving creatively, beyond all the auditions, you have to find your own path towards an outlet. Instead of getting discouraged, keep doing what you want to do. For example, I want to do more comedy, so I'm trying stand up, and found I love it. If you learn to create your own art, you will be more driven and you'll stick to it in the long run..

HollywoodChicago.com: Even though we're in 2015, there is still difficulties regarding the sexism in show business, and for women. What have you experienced regarding that, or what is your opinion about it as a young actress working in the business?

McCafferty: It's still a struggle, I see it every day. If you're a woman in this business, I would say don't put up with it. Know that you can be approached and lauded for your appearance, but not taken seriously for other areas of performance. That's an issue, and you shouldn't be shy about standing up for yourself, but also maintaining a level of professionalism. Women are held to a higher standard, which might not be fair. You have to recognize that, and if you're playing in the game, don't take everything at face value.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your acting training, what kind of characters did you like best to play, and which character, either portrayed before or some literary figure you love, would you really like to portray most and why?

McCafferty: Hmmm, what a loaded question. [laughs] I was always drawn to melodrama and those types of characters, and I found my way through there at first when I took up acting. That was my way in, and my mother made sure to give me an education in the classics. So I was up there with Scarlett O'Hara, for example. As far as that literary character, I always think about Elizabeth Bennet in Jane Austin's 'Pride and Prejudice.' I love that character, and any Jane Austin character. I would love to be cast in something like that.

HollywoodChicago.com: f you could suddenly go back to 1989, who would you look up first, and what would you tell them about our lives in 2015?

McCafferty: I probably would like to see how my parents were in 1989. I'd tell them, 'you're going to get a divorce, but stay married until I'm born please.' [laughs] Xoxo, Catherine.

The Chicago Gala Screening of "Mind Over Mindy" will take place Saturday, September 19th, 2015 – with a meet-and-greet of the cast beginning at 6pm, and screening at 8pm – at the Patio Theater, 6008 E. Irving Park Road, Chicago. Click here [20] details and to purchase tickets Featuring Catherine McCafferty, Larry Thomas, Laura Ann Parry, Jim O'Heir and Steve Parks. Written by Robert Alaniz. Directed by Robert Alaniz. Not Rated

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