

Interview: Adam McKay Comes Up Large in ‘The Big Short’

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CHICAGO – When HollywoodChicago.com last spoke to writer/director Adam McKay in 2013, he was about to release “Anchorman 2,” and wasn’t really known for anything but his wacky comedy films. That all changed this month, with the release of “The Big Short,” a brilliant indictment of the financial meltdown of 2007 and ’08, and an impressively creative and serious effort from the comic director.

Adam McKay has roots in Chicago, he was a founding member here of the Uptight Citizens Brigade in 1990, and worked at The Second City on the main stage in 1995. He worked at ‘Saturday Night Live’ thereafter, and was head writer for three seasons up to 2001. After SNL, he pursued filmmaking in partnership with Will Ferrell, and directed “Anchorman,” “Talladega Nights” and “The Other Guys.” In 2007, he and Ferrell started the “Funny or Die” website, and just recently McKay helped to write the final draft screenplay for “Ant-Man.” “The Big Short” is his sixth feature film as director.



Adam McKay (left) and Steve Carell Discuss a Scene in ‘The Big Short’

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com sat down with Adam McKay for the second time, to discuss his shift in tone and direction with “The Big Short,” and the process of getting there.

HollywoodChicago.com: We last talked two years ago in 2013. Just to give everyone an idea of the filmmaking process, where were you with ‘The Big Short’ at that point, and what did you do to evolve the process forward from that time?

Adam McKay: I’d had a conversation with Plan B, which was the production company, and we were talking about it. After ‘Anchorman 2’ the conversation continued in 2014, and I think I began by setting up a deal to write the script. But then I went off to work on ‘Ant-Man,’ so I got delayed for two and a half months. After that was done, I holed up for three months and wrote ‘The Big Short.’ When I turned in that draft, the film got its velocity.

HollywoodChicago.com: For the first time, you’re directing heavy hitter movie stars like Christian Bale, Ryan Gosling and Brad Pitt. Which of the three was most nerve-racking to you, either before you started or during the process?

McKay: Ryan I was totally cool with, no problem. Carell I’d known forever, so no problem there. Pitt is a really cool guy. I guess then the guy I was a bit nervous about was Christian Bale. I respect him like crazy, and it turned out when we were talking on the phone beforehand he was so smart, open and collaborative.

But I have to admit the first day on set I was nervous, and then he jumped into the character and I realized he was talking my language – it’s about listening in the scene and being grounded, and then immediately I was comfortable, and we had the best time working together.

HollywoodChicago.com: He created a helluva character....

McKay: He and Carell both. You have to look up some tape on the real guys, and they’re both really doing them, they nailed the specifics on both of them.

HollywoodChicago.com: You used the ‘breaking the fourth wall’ technique to breath-taking effect. What about this story and script caused you to change up and evolve your filmmaking style so much?

McKay: I felt like this was a story that was doing a lot of things, and I felt like it was a story that was driven by the characters. But I also felt like it was having a conversation with the audience. I’ve seen breaking-the-fourth-wall done elsewhere, and I did a bit of it on stage here in Chicago. I love the film ‘24 Hour Party People,’ in which they do it really well, and that film showed me that you could do the breaking the wall. If that movie could do it about the Manchester music scene, maybe I could do it in this case.

The second I read the book I felt like that’s how we had to do it. If we tried to cram this esoteric financial language into dialogue it would become weighty and stale. The truth is this stuff is exciting, it is the language of power. and how everything operates. This is how we pay rents, mortgages, schooling and medical bills. It always relates to this language.

HollywoodChicago.com: So what was the key to coming up with the unique ways that you finally presented that language?

McKay: The idea was to use our pop culture that we’re inundated with 24 hours a day, but what if that pop culture told us something we really needed to know? That’s where the idea came from, and that’s how we designed it.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve satirized the capitalist class before, and now you’re taking a direct shot at them. Given your experience with actual money men, what do you find to be the prevailing attitude towards money and money manipulation at that level?

McKay: Here’s the thing, I’m not against banking. Banking allowed our modern society to happen, it is essential. It connects the work through finance, so banking is good. What happened to the United States banking, in the last 30 years with all the deregulation, was the danger. Depending on who you talk to, the players in that financial game agree with what the movie is saying. We need a regulatory guide rail to keep us on track, and it ain’t there right now. This is coming from mid level guys, not guys at the top or Congress. [laughs]



Ben Rickert (Brad Pitt) in ‘The Big Short’
Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve directed Steve Carell in a surreal comedy, and now in this piece, arguably his best acting performance. Again, what make Carell the comic actor the ideal choice for the role he plays in ‘The Big Short’?

McKay: The trick with Carell is simply that he is one of the most prepared people you’ll ever meet. Whether he’s doing ‘Anchorman’ or ‘Foxcatcher’ he’s a guy who works really hard. And another thing about Carell – he has one of the great noses for B.S. I’ve ever encountered. He knows when the scene is not working or it’s not truthful.

I’ve done takes with him that I thought were great, but he’ll say there is more and want to do it again. I’ve learned to trust him on that, he knows where he can get to. It really clicked on this film, the two of us would chase down that truthful moment.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you know him when you were both in Chicago in the 1990s?

McKay: Yep. His eventual wife, Nancy Walls, was in my touring company at The Second City. I understudied a main stage show that had Carell, Stephen Colbert and Amy Sedaris. I didn’t know him well, but through Nancy we became friends.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you came into the writing of the film ‘Ant-Man’ to give it another voice, what did you contribute, do you believe, that allowed the thematics of a superhero movie to flow as it did?

McKay: ‘Ant-Man’ was an amazingly enjoyable experience. I got to hole up in a hotel with Paul Rudd, who is one of the greatest guys you’ll ever meet. For two months, we just laughed and wrote. A lot of people just assumed I added the funny stuff, but I did also write some great, fat action scenes, including the confrontation between Ant-Man and Falcon at the Avenger headquarters. I was a Marvel comics kid, so it was geek heaven for me. After it was over, the only thing I wanted from Marvel was an autographed Stan Lee poster, and they delivered.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is an example of a comic notion or element that you developed when you were in Chicago, that became something that is familiar in one of your films or in your style?

McKay: Friends that knew me in Chicago know that I like scenes that start very normal and relaxed, and then devolves into full-on chaos. When my friends saw Brick Tamland in ‘Anchorman’ kill someone with a Trident, they all thought, ‘yeah, that’s McKay.’

[CLICK HERE](#) [23] for the full review of “The Big Short” by Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com

[CLICK HERE](#) [24] for the 10 Best Films of 2015 by Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com, which includes “The Big Short.”

“The Big Short” is now in theaters everywhere. Featuring Steve Carrell, Brad Pitt, Christian Bale, Ryan Gosling, Hamish Linklater, Margot Robbie, Marisa Tomei and Selena Gomez. Screenplay adapted by Adam McKay and Charles Randolph. Directed by Adam McKay. Rated “R”



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