

Interview: Philosopher King Mike Birbiglia of ‘Don’t Think Twice’

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CHICAGO – When comedian/writer/director Mike Birbiglia is in his element, as during the interviews he conducted at The iO Theater in Chicago, he is relaxed and ardently philosophical. He has written and directed a new film, “Don’t Think Twice,” which is about a improvisation comedy troupe, but it’s also about life.

“Don’t Think Twice” – besides being a clever play on the famous Bob Dylan song title – is essentially about the stages of life, and how we react to our own ambitions. The members of the comedy troupe – portrayed by (clockwise in the picture below, starting top left) Mike Birbiglia, Kate Miccuci, Chris Gethard, Gillian Jacobs, Keegan-Michael Key and Tami Sagner – are at a crossroads in their professional and personal lives, and have to deal with the sudden uptick of fame to one of their members. As Birbiglia did with his first feature, ‘Sleepwalk with Me,’ he combines the heart of the human experience with the hilarity of comedy.



Writer/Director/Performer Mike Birbiglia (top left) and His Troupe in ‘Don’t Think Twice’

Photo credit: *The Film Arcade*

Mike Birbiglia is a Massachusetts native, who graduated from Georgetown University. He moved up the stand-up ladder as a young comedian, and made his national debut on David Letterman at 24 years old. He became noted for his one-man “story” shows, and “Sleepwalk with Me” from 2011 became his directorial debut as a feature film one year later. His other traveling stand-up show, “My Girlfriend’s Boyfriend,” became a sensation beginning in 2011, and he has toured it around the country.

Birbiglia conducted his interviews with HollywoodChicago.com and Kyle Cubr of Cine-File.Info at The iO Chicago, at its new location in the Clybourn Corridor neighborhood of Chicago. At the end of the interview, the co-founder Charna Halpern of the iO (with the legendary improv artist Del Close), came into the interview to say hello to Mike Birbiglia, and offered him some wisdom.

HollywoodChicago.com: You showed the spectrum of show business ambition within the comedy group dynamic in the film. From where you stand now, which level of ambition intrigues you the most?

Mike Birbiglia: When I watch the film I'm most drawn to Sam's character, who wants to have integrity and wants it to be about the group. But I also clearly have the ambition of Jack, because making a feature film is a pretty ambitious undertaking. [laughs] I will say what I aspire to is a consistency in making films, to direct something every couple of years.

HollywoodChicago.com: Would you then say that each of the improv group characters contain a bit of your personality at different levels?

Birbiglia: Yes. I always think in terms of I write about my experiences or what I've observed or heard about. Not all of it is me, but there are definite parts in all of the characters.

Cine-File: Given the nature of your stand-up act, how do you prioritize drama over comedy in your film?

Birbiglia: I was a screenwriting major in college, and really wanted to do that after I graduated, but there are no job listings for that, as we all know. I had many classmates that made it in the business, but stand-up comedy was my way in, and my first film 'Sleepwalk with Me' was based on those autobiographical experiences.

I thought if I could do stand-up comedy well enough, I could parlay it back into films - like Charlie Chaplin and Woody Allen did. They merged principles of comedy and drama together, and that's what my first film really was, a stab at that kind of comedy. When I made 'Sleepwalk with Me,' many people asked me if it was a novelty thing, a one-off. But this is the goal, I'm just hitting it 12 years after I thought I would.

HollywoodChicago.com: Creating the alternate universe 'Saturday Night Live' seemed like a lot of fun. What did you want to say about this 40 year old dynamic that had been percolating for a lot of years?

Birbiglia: Interesting that you ask that question. I actually love 'Saturday Night Live,' like a sports fan watches their favorite team to see how they're doing. I know the players and the writers, I've known several people on that show for a number of years. In the film, the fictional 'SNL' is the brass ring for the comedy group. It symbolizes a singular sort of success. In our culture right now, I want to take on this notion of what a singular success means. We think success is one thing, but it's actually a spectrum of where our life takes us.

I've experienced that in my life. In my twenties, I thought it was getting a sitcom. Then I got a sitcom pilot in my early thirties, and realized I didn't want it. It was a rude awakening. When it wasn't picked up, I was crushed, but then in retrospect I've made two films and produced three one-man shows since then. It's the luckiest thing that happened in my life.



Gillian Jacobs and Keegan-Michael Key in 'Don't Think Twice'

Photo credit: The Film Arcade

Cine-File: What do you think the film has to say about getting what you want, success-wise, or just making it?

Birbiglia: Similar to my previous answer, I think our culture views success as visibility, being seen as being successful. Whereas I’ve learned that success is rooted in helping and connecting to other people, and knowing where you can contribute. I’ve kind of spent my thirties doing that, because in my twenties I was seeking any kind of success.

I figured out in my thirties it was about ‘what can I contribute’? And what I figured out about that is creating something from scratch, and connecting it to people. What I write is emotionally honest and truthful as the human experience can be, to make people feel less alone, or at least that’s the hope. At a certain point I realized that all I have to give is myself, and it took me awhile to realize that.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you believe was the funniest moment that came out of improvisation in the final result of the picture?

Birbiglia: When Gillian Jacobs said the ‘last drop of blood is the sweetest nectar,’ which was just one of the weirdest and most perverse moment in context, and it was completely improvised. I thought, she hadn’t even trained in improvisation and she was as good as anyone.

Gillian is brilliant, and it was Lena Dunham that recommended her. I didn’t see her in the part, but Lena told me that Gillian can do anything. It turned out to be true. With this film, I believe we’re going to witness the beginnings of movie stardom for Gillian.

Cine-File: One of the major themes of the film is the comedy “team” versus the individual. Do you have to be selfish to be successful in such a dynamic?

Birbiglia: You got me! [laughs] Sure. I wrote on my desk wall when I was writing the film... ‘Art is socialism, but life is capitalism.’ That’s the hard thing in all of it if you expect to make a living. Where art and business intersect is a challenging hurdle for a lot of people, reconciling the fact that not everyone is going to make it in the same way. Yeah, you have to be a little selfish, probably. I’ve been selfish over the years, and other people who have made it have too, but I can only speak for myself.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you were stuck on something having to do with this film, and thinking like having a ‘What would Jesus do?’ type bracelet, what would be your go-to, as in ‘What would _____ do?’

Birbiglia: Elia Kazan. He wrote my favorite book about filmmaking, ‘Elia Kazan: On Directing.’ There is a thing in the book that I do every time, it’s part of my production structure. He said when you’re hiring an actor, ask them what draws them to the project, and don’t lead them to the answer.

I have this habit of asking ‘why do you want to do it?’ and then interrupting them to say, ‘here’s why you want to do it.’ [laughs] Because it’s in the ‘yes...and’ spirit [rule of improvisation]. You want them to want to do it for the reasons you want them to do it. But you can’t lead them to it. It goes for everyone on the set...cinematographers up to editors.

Cine-File: You showcased the improvisation method of stage comedy in the film. What do you think of that type of work versus writing sketch comedy?

Birbiglia: All techniques of comedy are valid and interesting to me. When I was in college my improvisation troupe and I did a road trip to Chicago, and went to The Second City to see the classic ‘Paradigm Lost’ revue – with Tina Fey, Rachel Dratch, Scott Adsit and Kevin Dorff. It blew my mind, and proved to me you can do sketch comedy like you’re doing ‘Long Day’s Journey into Night.’ We could treat it like theater.

I also saw Steven Wright do stand-up comedy when I was 16 years old. It flipped my brain upside down. With improv, Uptight Citizen’s Brigade in New York City is doing amazing things. It’s so hard for me to answer your question without saying, all of these things are great...when they are great. Inversely, they are terrible when they’re terrible. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you think the disconnect is between what is funny to you, and what is funny to the audience, and how does a working comedian close that gap?

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Mike Birbiglia & Charna Halpern at iO Chicago
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Birbiglia: I struggled with that notion early in my career. 'I know this is funny but nobody is laughing.' This thought occurred for years. [laughs] I have a bit in my show 'My Girlfriend's Boyfriend' about the amusement park ride called The Scrambler. It was when I was in seventh grade, and I was at the fair with a girl, I thought maybe I would have my first kiss while on that ride. We were 'scrambling' but I knew I was going to throw up. I kept saying 'please stop the ride,' and we went around again, 'please stop the ride.'

I told a friend that story when I was 24 years old. He told me I had to tell it on stage. At that time, I wasn't the comedian that I became. I couldn't pull it off on stage at the time, but it became the centerpiece theme of 'My Girlfriend's Boyfriend' nine years later. I think sometimes you don't understand how to convey an idea, depending on the moment you're living in.

Cine-File: You told a Q&A audience that there is a difference in being clever, versus speaking from heart. How much of 'Don't Think Twice' do you think is both clever and speaking from the heart?

Birbiglia: I think it's all heart, and I think the cleverness is inadvertent. It is six clever people who I booked, that have opened up their hearts. You get the cleverness by default, I think.

HollywoodChicago.com: You are having a dinner party with four other comedians or even comic actor/directors, living or dead. Who are they and why do you want to have dinner with them?

Birbiglia: Okay, first would be [stand-up comedian] Maria Bamford, because she is entirely unique, hilarious and creative, empathetic and sweet. Mitch Hedberg, because I think he is one of the great comedians of the past 20 years. Also Lenny Bruce, so he could explain to me what happened. [laughs] And finally Richard Pryor, for similar reasons, to explain what he spawned.

Cine-File: What do you hope the film says to aspiring filmmakers and comedians?

Birbiglia: Stop. You can't do any better. [laughs] Seriously, it is similar to what I said in the Q&A last night, which was it's all you have to give of yourself. It takes so long to figure that out, and you can't teach it, because it's something that everyone has to learn individually. There are so many people who are clever. There are 8000 people at Princeton who are more clever than the three of us at this table. BUT, we have the ability to give something that they don't have...which is us.

HollywoodChicago.com: You mentioned 'yes...and' as one of the famous rules of improvisation. What are some of the other rules?

Birbiglia: Why I still do it, even though I've never made a dime doing it, [laughs] is that I get out of my head. You get out of your head. I love that.

[Charna Halpern, co-founder of iO Chicago, walks into the interview]

Birbiglia: Charna, what do you think is the most important thing about improvisation other than 'yes...and'?

Charna Halpern: The way it makes better people.

Birbiglia: YES!

Halpern: We get people to take care of each other. Del [Close, co-founder] and I created ‘theater of the hurt,’ where we get people to take care of each other on stage. When you do that, it comes off the stage, you’re just better to everyone in the community.

Birbiglia: That’s exactly right, Charna. I’m stealing that answer.

[CLICK HERE](#) [19] for the 4.5/5 star review for “Don’t Think Twice.”

[CLICK HERE](#) [20] for the 2012 HollywoodChicago.com interview of Mike Birbiglia regarding his first film, “Sleepwalk with Me.”

“Don’t Think Twice” continues its nationwide release in Chicago on July 29th at the Music Box Theatre, 3733 North Southport, Chicago. Featuring Mike Birbiglia, Keegan-Michael Key, Gillian Jacobs, Tami Sagner, Chris Gethard and Kate Miccuci Written and directed by Mike Birbiglia. Rated “R”



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