

Interview: Simon Helberg Performs With ‘Florence Foster Jenkins’

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CHICAGO – For nine seasons, Simon Helberg has graced the television screen as Howard, on the number one comedy hit “The Big Bang Theory.” As the show nears the end of its run, Helberg is breaking out a bit, starting with a vital supporting role opposite Meryl Streep in the new film, “Florence Foster Jenkins.”

The film tells the based-on-truth story of the title character, a wealthy women of society who desires only to sing opera, but cannot carry a tune. With the help of her husband St. Clair Bayfield (Hugh Grant) and her piano accompanist Cosmé Moon (Helberg), she manages to get all the way to a performance at Carnegie Hall, and the subsequent recording of that 1940s concert has become one of the most requested and popular to come out of that legendary music venue.



Simon Helberg as Cosmé Moon in ‘Florence Foster Jenkins’

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

Simon Helberg was born in Los Angeles in 1980, and did his performance training at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University and the Atlantic Theater group. In the early 2000s, he did a comedy act with Derek Waters called Derek & Simon, and in 2007 the duo had an online show created with comedian Bob Odenkirk, while Helberg was also doing small movie roles. That same year he was cast as Howard Wolowitz on “The Big Bang Theory,” a role he continues to this day. The series has been the number one comedy on American television for the last four seasons.

HollywoodChicago.com talked to Simon Helberg about his new film character, a departure from the familiar territory of Howard, and a role that is now part of the evolution in his successful career.

HollywoodChicago.com: You made specific choices with your character of Cosmé McMoon, with I presume very little knowledge of the actual man. Was there anything in his background, now lost to history, that motivated your character choices or him?

Simon Helberg: Some of it was pulled, I suppose, from wherever that source of inspiration comes from, but mainly it came from the brilliant script by Nicholas Martin. I saw him a certain way when I read it, then I went down the road on trying to research him – it’s interesting that you said ‘lost to history,’ because that was sort of true. There were a handful of things in that research that were helpful.

I also looked at the job of piano accompanist. It’s a selfless position and generally they are odd people, according to opera singers I talked to. Just like everybody else, they want more from their life, but now their job is to make others shine. Cosmé was a weightlifter, and saw the gay guys in the film as ‘personable.’ I thought, because he was a man of the 1940s, he may have not known he was gay. It wasn’t about repression, he didn’t even know, and there is a purity to that. Because director Stephen Frears never said ‘no’ to my choices, I just kept bringing it to him.

HollywoodChicago.com: Does Meryl Streep actually prepare an actor to play opposite to her, especially when with her reputation and this being your first time doing it?

Helberg: Part of the reason that she is so brilliant is because she is so human, and aware as a performer. She is there to make the story as great as possible. And also part of that is she has to calm down everyone around her. [laughs] She immediately disarmed me, and that was comforting, because I was a bit scared. But when you’re in a scene with her she is great, because she listens so well, and it helped me to be better. I was also drawn into Florence’s world, and many times I’d forget it was Meryl.

HollywoodChicago.com: Stephen Frears is one the oldest of old veteran directors. In your observation, what is most important to him on a movie set, based on the way he conducts himself on set?

Helberg: He kind of hides all that, and never says much. The thing he did focus on, however – and was almost was carried away by – was the music and the technicality. I think he feigns the aloof and absentminded quality, and would say things like [Helberg affects a Stephen Frears voice] ‘I don’t know anything about music, I’m just a film director. My job is just to not f**k it up.’ And in many ways, that is true. Even Meryl, when she talked about the great directors she has worked with, it’s all about getting the right actors, and letting them go.

But he did focus on the music, especially the length of the songs for cutaways. And the people around him were telling him to not worry about it until post-production. He was quite literal about it, and would get caught up into the technicalities. He was nervous about that, because he wanted all the music live, and in the end he was right about doing it that way.



Simon Helberg is Backstage with Meryl Streep and Hugh Grant in ‘Florence Foster Jenkins’

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you portray a popular and recognizable television character, are you conscious about the look and feel of a new character so he won’t be compared to Howard?

Helberg: No, I didn’t think about it, but certainly that notion is a byproduct of playing a TV character for a long time. It’s always nice when

someone says that they don't realize it's me on screen, but it would be strange to enter a one story while thinking of another character I do, which is completely different.

HollywoodChicago.com: For awhile you lived in the 1940s with the film's setting. What did you observe as the advantages of that era, as opposed to our modern society?

Helberg: Well, for one thing, Florence would not have existed as a singer if she worked now – trolls on social media would have eviscerated her. It's a one-sided witch hunt with a strange megaphone. Our era doesn't allow for something so strange and innocent to occur. She ultimately succeeded because she brought joy to those who knew her, but as a public figure I don't think she would have survived today.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you portrayed a single character for nine years, and within the universe of that character, do you keep discovering things about him personally that you fold into him, or are you willing to let the writers and producers formulate him?

Helberg: I think it becomes more instinctual than specifically thought about, and the writers on the show do a tremendous job of evolving him. He begins on the page, and then I get the script, and suddenly I know something else about him. 'That's interesting,' I say to myself. [laughs] At this point, though, I do want to keep him fresh, but obviously I can't be gratuitous about it. It's not like I can give Howard a nose ring, because I was bored.

HollywoodChicago.com: One of the many circumstances in being on a long running hit TV show is sudden recognition in public. Since you rose from being not as well known when you started the show to now, what has been your reaction to being recognized on the street? Or do they recognize you?

Helberg: Yes, they definitely do. And sometimes it's overwhelming, especially if they start acting a bit smothering. Generally people are nice, but it's so weird that it has made me more cautious. Just like anyone else, I like looking around at my environment, but now as I walk down the street I tend to look down.

I don't mind being recognized, it's just that I have a bit of social anxiety, and this situation has increased it. The idea of having to be 'on' and social at random times can be difficult. I'll be out in the morning, someone comes and takes a picture, and then I discover I have toothpaste on my face. [laughs]



Simon Helberg as Howard Wolowitz in 'The Big Bang Theory'

Photo credit: CBS-TV

HollywoodChicago.com: In the long run of 'The Big Bang Theory,' have you ever had a time where the first table read of a script is not working, but the episode turns out great, or vice versa, the table read kills and the episode doesn't work as well?

Helberg: Yes, that is what's disconcerting about working on the show, you can't seem to get an instinct about what works and what doesn't. It happens a lot, and in different ways. There are bits at the table read that destroy, so much so that we can't wait to do it in taping. And then, no reaction. And then there are times when I can't get the right read on a line in rehearsal, and then the audience howls at it. The strange thing is I still don't know why it happens like that. It's not like afterwards I think, 'Now I know why that worked!' [laughs]

It was like in the film, when I was actually doing a take and wasn't quite sure of the context, and then in the completed film it works beautifully. But in the end I didn't know why I felt so shitty doing it, and why it turns out great in the final product. I guess you have to live in that unknown.

HollywoodChicago.com: With this film, you are taking the next step in your career and in character roles. What do you want to be considered for going forward, that you think casting directors don't necessarily see you as?

Helberg: I like to do things I haven't done before. The film character is a comedic role, which is the area I live in, but it is a different kind of character. I want to do more flawed and dramatic characters. I have to see it to know it, and I just know that I'm not interested in doing the same kind of thing going forward. I realize it's hard for people in this business to open up their minds and think of me in dramatic roles, but I have to do this to move forward.

“Florence Foster Jenkins” opens everywhere on August 12th. Featuring Meryl Streep, Simon Helberg, Hugh Grant, Rebecca Ferguson and Christian McKay. Written by Nicholas Martin. Directed by Stephen Frears.



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