

Interview, Audio: Director Brett Haley Discovers ‘The Hero’

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CHICAGO – The familiar character actor and voiceover artist, Sam Elliott, has been breaking out in that latter part of his career. Known for his cowboy roles, smooth bass-tone voice and epic mustache, the icon has been seen lately in diverse roles in “Grandma,” “Digging for Fire,” “Grace and Frankie” and his latest – and perhaps greatest – “The Hero.”



Brett Haley and Sam Elliott on the Set of ‘The Hero’

Photo credit: The Orchard

“The Hero” is co-written (with Marc Basch) and directed by Brett Haley, who had previously directed Elliott, opposite Blythe Danner, in “I’ll See You in my Dreams.” Haley must have been inspired, because he wrote “The Hero” expressly for Elliott, and uses the actor’s cowboy character past as a basis for the role of Lee Hayden, an old actor with a broken past, and a health condition that changes everything. Elliott is masterful as the lead in the film, trying to make amends in a world that wants to either worship or condemn him. It is a special performance and film, one of the best of 2017.

Brett Haley writes and directs sensitive human tales, and has used older people reflecting on their lives in “The Hero” and the aforementioned “I’ll See You in My Dreams.” He also makes surprising cast choices, as Martin Starr (“Silicon Valley”) portrays a completely different character in “...Dreams” and Laura Prepon (“That ‘70s Show”) absolutely kills as a conflicted stand-up comic in “The Hero.” Haley began his directorial career with the short film “The Life and Death of Jimmy Katz” in 2005, and did his first feature film five years later with “The New Year.” HollywoodChicago.com talked to Brett Haley as he screened “The Hero” at the recent Chicago Critics Film Festival, combining the

Q&A transcript with some audio below.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you think Sam Elliott represents in the whole mythos of the American West, especially in the last 40 years since his debut as an actor in 'Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid'?

Brett Haley: Sam is no bullshit. He's a genuine, down-to-earth, real man. And what I mean by that is is not the general definition of masculinity, but just a good man. He takes care of his family and he's not to be f**ked with, but at the same time a kind and gentle person. He represents everything I love about people, man or woman. He's the real deal, and there is nothing 'put on' about him... he's singular and one of a kind.

HollywoodChicago.com: You are a writer/director who seems to understand the delicacies of aging and the experiences of older folks. What is the origin of that fascination?

Haley: I don't think it's so much of a specific fascination, as just an obsession with humans in general, and the life-and-death that comes with that interest. It just so happened that the last two films I made were about older people, because the themes I was exploring regarding loss came better from older characters. I wanted to make this film with Sam Elliott, and I wanted him to be the guy, and he's 72 years old. It comes with the territory of the film.

I try to be honest about that time of life. If the character is in his or her 70's, I want to be true to that nature. I don't want any dumb clichés, I simply want it to feel real. People ask me all the time, 'the film feels so genuine, how do you get into that time of life?' But I hope all my characters feel genuine, because I don't approach as I have to write someone specifically to their age. But I am fascinated by it, and we should all be so lucky to get a little older.

HollywoodChicago.com: Within the film, you have Elliott's character dreaming of being in a Western movie. What Westerns did you like to study to create that atmosphere, that Western myth?



Coming Soon: Brett Haley of 'The Hero'
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Haley: I went classic, I went to Sergio Leone [known for films like 'The Good, the Bad and The Ugly']. You can't get much better than that, and my Director of Photography [Rob Givens] and I watched a bunch of Leone films. The 'Man With No Name' trilogy has an iconic hero, connected directly to the Western mythos. Leone always loves to use the close-up followed with a wide shot, which leaked over to the regular part of the film as well. You rarely hear people talk about the silence in a Western, where it's just reaction and no dialog. And much of 'The Hero' lives in reaction, and no words.

HollywoodChicago.com: Marijuana, as an escape, plays a big role in both 'The Hero' and 'I'll See You in My Dreams.' How important is self medication, in your viewpoint, to survival?

Haley: Look, I think we all self medicate. Even someone who eats Vegan and goes to spin class every morning is self medicating themselves, but in a different way. It's a way to control the stress in their lives, and get it out of their brains for awhile, and we all have different ways of approaching it.

I have nothing against drug use, I think it should be legal. We've wasted time, money and people's lives behind bars for non-violent offenses. There is the dark side of addiction, but there is also the lighter side of using marijuana instead of taking harsh chemical pharmaceuticals. Everyone can have their own opinion, but for me in writing this film – and the character that Sam plays – he needed to be in a cloud. He's trying to escape. I'm not putting this up as a good thing or a bad thing, it's just everything in moderation... spin class included. [laughs]

In the audio portion of the interview, it begins with a Sam Elliott quote about the American Western genre from 2015, during his

interview with HollywoodChicago.com for his film “Grandma.” Brett Haley then continues with his insight on Elliott’s acting range in the film and his way of casting unexpected actors in roles of deep perspective.

“The Hero” has a Chicago release on June 16th, nationwide by July 4th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Sam Elliott, Laura Prepon, Krysten Ritter, Nick Offerman, Katherine Ross and Max Gail. Written by Brett Haley and Marc Basch. Directed by Brett Haley. Rated “R”



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