Interview: Managing Expectations of Life, Love With ‘Management’ Director Stephen Belber

Submitted by BrianTT [1] on May 14, 2009 - 2:10pm

- Brian Tallerico [2]
- Frank Langella [3]
- Fred Ward [4]
- HollywoodChicago.com Content [5]
- Interview [6]
- Jennifer Aniston [7]
- Management [8]
- Margo Martindale [9]
- Richard Linklater [10]
- Stephen Belber [11]
- Steve Zahn [12]
- Woody Harrelson [13]

CHICAGO – Stephen Belber, the acclaimed playwright behind “The Laramie Project” and “Tape,” which was adapted into a feature film by director Richard Linklater [10], makes his directorial debut this week with the quirky romantic comedy “Management [8]” starring Steve Zahn [12] and Jennifer Aniston [7]. He took time out of his busy schedule to make an international call from Paris, France to discuss the film with HollywoodChicago.com.

When Belber saw how his stage work and experience could be successfully adapted into cinema with the excellent “Tape,” it opened doors for him to want to direct himself.



Writer/Director Stephen Belber on the set of Management
Photo credit: Suzanne Hanover / Samuel Goldwyn Films

“It was sort of the first time that I realized that I didn’t have to dichotomize my screenwriting and my playwriting,” says Belber. “It allowed me to segue into screenwriting without feeling that I was selling out.”



Management
Photo credit: Samuel Goldwyn Films

“I remember sitting with a crowd at Sundance watching it and realizing that there is a thirst, at least in certain small crowds, for dialogue on-screen and that you can make it cinematic and interesting and dramatic. I always go back to that when I feel a scene is getting too long on a page.”

Belber knew that his theatre background would give him an advantage with his stars on “Management”. Belber says, “It was the one advantage I had going into this process. Not knowing how to move a camera particularly well or handle a crew, I did know how to talk to actors. In theater, you workshop endlessly, which means you sit around with actors and you chew on ideas and you create character arcs that are more fleshed out and organic. And so you do have a lexicon that you can use with actors.

“Luckily, I summoned the courage to ask Steve and Jen to rehearse with me for a week prior to shooting. It felt like I was back in theater school. We went through the scenes chronologically, which you don’t have the luxury of doing during a shoot. It allowed them to trust me because they realized that I knew about character and I learned to trust them because I knew they could really defy audience expectations of them. They are so much more beyond the goofy sidekick and the sitcom star.”

Neither part was written specifically for Zahn or Aniston but they both shaped the film drastically before shooting even began. Belber has huge praise for his male lead, calling him “one of the greatest actors of his generation” and nothing, “…he had a very subtle combination of the weird, funny, quirky awkwardness and the heart and the acting chops necessary to bring the role around by the end. He was one of the few guys who could pull it off, I thought.”



Writer/Director Stephen Belber, Jennifer Aniston and Steve Zahn on the set of Management
Photo credit: Suzanne Hanover / Samuel Goldwyn Films

Belber actually cast Jennifer Aniston in “Management” first, being an admirer of her “indie film muscle” in films like “The Good Girl” and “Friends With Money”. The script found its way to Aniston through her agent and the two met “and it was a no-brainer. She was so ready to take on the less glamorous aspects of the role and work with me dramaturgically on it and really play it. And it gave us a certain financial flexiblity to cast someone like Steve who has not been the lead star in a lot of movies.”

“She saw the heart that I was going for that is easy sometimes to miss and was probably a little underwritten at first and she helped me work on,” says Belber. “She’s such a big star but it’s not always true that big stars, female stars particularly, get a great part.”

Jennifer, Steve, and Stephen worked in pre-production on the script. Belber notes about Aniston, “From our first meeting on, she was tuned in to some of the underwritten feminist qualities and the things that I needed to sort of help bring out in the script. About a month before shooting, we did a reading in LA and the next day we had a day-long meeting that was really helpful and Jen was really insightful. Again, just making sure we chart her movements along the way, even if they’re not always on-screen. That her decisions make sense to her as an actor and to us in the audience. And Steve, you can’t write some of the stuff that he’s able to come up with in the moment. He and I had a lot of fun between takes just shooting ideas back and forth and then he would riff off of them and come up with stuff.”

The protagonist of “Management” believes wholeheartedly in his goals and passions, going to extreme for what he wants. Belber admitted to living vicariously through his lead, admitting, “I imagined what would I do if I was going 105%.”

Belber is conscious fo the fact that his film is being released in the middle of one of the most crowded movie months in a very long time at the multiplex or arthouse. “I’m most worried because it doesn’t fit into a genre,” says Belber. “They were trying to find a date that didn’t compete with other movies within the genre and we realized it straddles a couple of genres. It’s tricky to condition audiences to like it. Right now, the trailer and the poster are selling it as a broad, mainstream, romantic comedy with big laughs. The early responses we’re getting are more for its quietness and its sweetness more than its broadness. How do you market that in a very crowded market? It’s tough. I’m in France. I’m trying to escape. (Laughs.) Jen’s name is obviously great but with that comes certain expectations from an audience.”

See if “Management” delivers on your expectations when it opens tomorrow, May 15th, 2009.

‘Management’ stars Steve Zahn, Jennifer Aniston, Margo Martindale, Fred Ward, and Woody Harrelson. It was written and directed by Stephen Belber. It opens on May 15th, 2009. It is rated R.


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