

## Mike Birbiglia Steps Up in ‘Sleepwalk with Me’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on September 1, 2012 - 7:44am

- [Alex Karpovsky](#) [2]
- [Amy Schumer](#) [3]
- [Carol Kane](#) [4]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [5]
- [IFC Films](#) [6]
- [Ira Glass](#) [7]
- [James Rebhorn](#) [8]
- [Kristen Schaal](#) [9]
- [Lauren Ambrose](#) [10]
- [Mike Birbiglia](#) [11]
- [Movie Review](#) [12]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [13]
- [Sleepwalk with Me](#) [14]
- [Wyatt Cenac](#) [15]



Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – It’s exciting to witness a breakthrough with a new film artist. The comedian Mike Birbiglia has adapted his one-man show, “Sleepwalk with Me,” into a movie, and the result is a naturalistic performance piece that plays both like a documentary and a Woody Allen film during the “Annie Hall” period. Birbiglia gets a little help from some friends like Lauren Ambrose, Kirsten Schaal, Wyatt Cenac and Amy Schumer.

This is a based-on-real-events story of Birbiglia’s actual bout with a dangerous sleepwalking condition, one that had him falling off furniture and doing potential damage to all of his relationships. He parallels this struggle with his quest to mate, relating to his girlfriend while trying to develop a stand up career. The film is gutsy, poignant, very funny and has a style that plays like Cinéma Vérité, the fancy film school term that means “truth.” Plus it has the bonus of cameos from the current crop of hot comedians, who are in essence co-workers of the sleepwalking man.

Mike Birbiglia portrays his fictional twin, Matt Pandamiglio. He is a bartender at a club that occasionally features comedy. Matt longs to try his hand on stage, but his act is stale and it worries his girlfriend, Abby (Lauren Ambrose). A chance encounter with an agent starts his career on the road, and it is here he starts to hone what will become his signature laconic act. But his relationship starts to disintegrate, and in desperation he becomes engaged.



Let Me Tell You a Story: Matt (Mike Birbiglia) on the Road in ‘Sleepwalk with Me’  
*Photo credit: IFC Films*

His peculiar habit of sleepwalking becomes more prevalent when under stress, so his marriage plans and his nascent comedy career begin to take its toll. He wakes up after falling off the top of a dresser, he wakes up in the middle of a shower, he begins to endanger himself and others. Meanwhile, the relationship he wants to become forever might not even make it to next week. If only the tragedy of his life could translate to comedy, all might turn out okay.

The low-keyed Birbiglia has captured a circumstance which is so relatable, at least in the context of his relationship, that it probably has happened to 90% of the audience. The buy-in to the film is essentially the stress of everyday life, and in his case it translates to the sleepwalking condition, which is both weirdly funny and unusually creepy. The sleepwalker is usually portrayed in story culture as comic relief, but here is a new twist – how the condition can be both a danger to the practitioner and the outside world, yet still provide the surprising laughs.

The film also serves as a document on the career of Birbiglia, as his cinematic twin goes through the stages of getting brave enough to do it for the first time, understanding that it is something that he needs to do, going through the horrible gigs that beginners have to endure and then finding the breakthrough that gets him to the next level. There is nothing easy about stand-up comedy, and behind-the-scenes on the traveling from club to club level is nicely rendered. There is also the bonus of experiencing Birbiglia’s comedy fellow travelers, and they have one scene where they talk about the craft that is poignantly funny.

Speaking of poignant, the relationship stuff is a punch to the gut. The circumstance that Matt is going through is so common, that it is the probable cause of most “starter marriages” (the phenomenon of first marriages that last a year or less). Lauren Ambrose (“Six Feet Under”) is a perfectly cast girlfriend, so eager to support Matt and make the relationship work that she cannot see the separation that is occurring within the coupling. The pressure from society to perpetuate the ceremony of marriage is evident in the wrangling of the main relationship, as well as how people want to do the right thing and not make waves.



Matt and Abby (Lauren Ambrose) with Parents Linda (Carol Kane) and Frank (James Rebhorn) in ‘Sleepwalk with Me’

Photo credit: IFC Films

There is that “Annie Hall” quality to the landscape of the movie, in a post millennial and younger couple sense. Birbiglia also uses a unique narration device in which he’s talking to the camera during a long drive, even pausing to pay a toll. This adds up to an eternal truth about relating as a couple – much like the eggs monologue in Woody’s film – that is expressed from behind the wheel.

What is exciting about all this is hopefully more films from this new voice. It is the type of material that rises to the top, having started on a stand-up stage, morphing to a one-man show and finally becoming a movie. If this kind of communicative force occurs with this material, we can look forward to more from Mike Birbiglia.

*“Sleepwalk with Me” has a limited release, including Chicago, on August 31st. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Mike Birbiglia, Lauren Ambrose, Wyatt Cenac, Ira Glass, Kristen Schaal, Amy Schumer and Alex Karpovsky. Written by Mike Birbiglia, Joe Birbiglia, Ira Glass and Seth Barrish. Directed by Mike Birbiglia and Seth Barrish. Not rated.*



[16]

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