

Interview: Director Rupert Wyatt Bets on Mark Wahlberg in 'The Gambler'

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CHICAGO – One could say that “Rise of the Planet of the Apes” director Rupert Wyatt has been pretty lucky. But even he’ll tell you that with his followup feature, “The Gambler,” he could be back to zero.

After making the critically-renowned prison film “The Escapist,” he was scooped up to reboot the “Planet of the Apes” franchise, and did so with the praised “Rise of the Planet of the Apes.” The English director has now released his third feature, “The Gambler,” starring Mark Wahlberg. A remake of the same-titled 1974 film starring James Caan and even the inspiring Dostoyevsky novel, this project features Wahlberg as college professor in grave existential crisis. Carelessly putting himself in dangerous amounts of debt to moneylenders played by John Goodman and Michael K. Williams, “The Gambler” is the story of a man who may not survive to restart. In a year of films about Americans working hard for their success, “The Gambler” is a jazzy take, nonetheless from a Hollywood studio, that shakes up the manner in which we sympathize with a losing character.

HollywoodChicago.com sat down with the rising director to discuss his film, his choice for a personal after “Rise of the Planet of the Apes,” how Mark Wahlberg is like a duck, and more. “The Gambler” is now playing in theaters nationwide.

HollywoodChicago: What do you think makes Mark Wahlberg special as an actor?

Wyatt: I think Mark is just one of those actors, for me, where he’s a little bit like a duck in that you don’t see the feet paddling. He’s very effortless. A lot of actors you see the work, and sometimes you see the work because it’s so evident. And it wasn’t lost on me that when he did “The Fighter,” other performances around him like Christian Bale’s, an extraordinary performance but a much more showy performance, it was part of the character as well, whereas Mark played the solid, still center. And that more than often can get overlooked in terms of how hard that is to pull that off. I think it’s very easy when playing those roles just to disappear, if you don’t have a certain presence or a certain magnetism. Charisma is ultimately what makes a person a movie star I think, and Mark has that in spades. To me, he’s Spencer Tracy.

HollywoodChicago.com: How conscious were you of Wahlberg’s star image when creating this character with him?

Wyatt: Going into it, I knew that we had a very empathetic actor playing essentially what is a very unlikable character. That to me was gold dust, because I think if we had an actor who was less likable, it would have been too tough to get under the skin of him.

HollywoodChicago.com: You were actively conscious of his appeal too.

Wyatt: Yeah. He’s a true everyman which is what makes him so appealing. And the character he plays is anything but, he’s a very rarified individual. I think the only way that we could tap into what made that character tick was an actor like Mark who is very much someone who comes from a blue collar background. He’s playing a guy who is very white collar, WASPish, west coast and from a very wealthy family with a college education and is a college professor, and a meddling novelist, but a guy who lives inside of his head. And it’s less about his physicality and everyone’s conceptions of Mark. A lot of people’s preconceptions of Mark because he’s played these characters a lot are the more action-oriented, so it was great to take someone who was 180 degrees from this character. I think Mark is one of those actors who is quite fearless in that respect. He takes on roles that are very different from him, and that’s the mark of a really good actor, and an interesting actor.

HollywoodChicago.com: Wahlberg has these golden moments where his rapid-fire dialogue makes for great existential monologues as a literature professor. How did you approach these essential scenes?

Wyatt: We worked very closely to the script, almost verbatim. [William Monahan’s] dialogue is so rarified and so elevated that it’s hard to deviate from it. He writes kind of in a Tarantino-slash-Shakespearean kind of way, it’s heightened reality. But we approached it as a seven-page monologue early on in the movie during the lecture, where he sets out the rules of his life and how he perceives society as a whole. We didn’t want it to be dry and stuffy, because no one wants to go to the movies and watch a college lecture. This guy was a rockstar. Every student in the college wants to come to his class and hear him talk. And he’s challenging, and he interacts with his students, he’s a stage performer. And so we constructed physically the space like an amphitheater, we then let Mark loose and he memorized the script so well months beforehand that we could run that scene again-and-again that it was like theater basically because it was the first two days of the shoot which was actually at Mark’s request, because it was a big scene for him.

HollywoodChicago: There are a lot of zig-zags in the filmmaking of this story - cutaways from expected moments, or even surprising musical cues. Was this at all influenced by your previous experience with the more directly-Hollywood project “Rise of the Planet of the Apes”?

Wyatt: For me, the filmmaking should serve the story, first and foremost. So for me, it was always about in many ways I took this film to try

something different, to try something much more character-driven and less genre. And even though this could fall into a set of genre boxes, the notion of gambling, the noir aspect of that, I wanted to sort of subvert that as much as I could. That said, I love high concept genre filmmaking, it might even be where I am most naturally sort of placed as a filmmaker, but this for me was a film that gave me the opportunity to do my own kind of personal Hal Ashby homage, which for better or for worse is what I was aiming to do.

HollywoodChicago.com: And we need more Hal Ashby movies out there.

Wyatt: Exactly. And it's a rare gift when a studio comes along and has a movie like this, that's testament to the studio and also to Mark, because he's the one behind it.



Jim (Mark Wahlberg) and Amy (Brie Larson) Place Their Bets in 'The Gambler'

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: Did this movie also function as a break, or a type of creative recharge for you?

Wyatt: The story of "The Gambler" is very much about a man who is looking to subvert his life and the expectations of his life. We all sort of have this notion that we have to reach the very top of our professions or reach extraordinary material gain, and there's a real tragedy if that becomes the priority. There's a line in the movie where the student he falls in love with, played by Brie Larson, says to him, "Did you write this novel because you believed in it, or is it because you thought that's what people wanted?" And I don't think it was lost on us as filmmakers in the sense that such really boils to how one really travels through this career, and I was afforded so many extraordinary opportunities after making "Rise of the Planet of the Apes," but I really did want to get back to doing something quite personal. And I was actually doing that and attempting to get it off the ground, and sadly it didn't happen, when this movie came along, this to me was the perfect hybrid of staying in the system but trying something that was challenging. And not necessarily the best career move, but I say that in you could take another high concept tent pole, then it all boils down to box office and less about critical acclaim, and I wanted to do something that I felt had a different set of rules.

HollywoodChicago.com: Even though the content is not what one would call an immediate blockbuster, it's still playing within studio rules. What excites you about working in Hollywood filmmaking?

Wyatt: I love so many different tiers of filmmaking or aspects of filmmaking. It's not like I see Hollywood as the be-all end-all, but it has given me a career as a filmmaker. I spent 15 years trying to get my first film off the ground, and I'm a little bit like that person who's been deprived for a very long time, but then when I got that key to the door, I sort of said, "I'm going to go there." You don't become a better filmmaker by not making movies is my philosophy, and that said, you have to throw everything, the kitchen sink, your passion into each movie and that's the only way to make them good.

But I like Hollywood in that it is a little game of Snakes and Ladders, but there is a rule book to it. But it's not like winning the lottery. You can navigate what can be choppy waters, but you can approach it with, "I have a vision for something, I have a passion for something, and then I can throw it into something that is already green lit." And with ["The Gambler"], I thought, "I'm going to tailor this as best I can." and that's a different kind of filmmaking to somebody I guess that originates from the ground-up like I did with my first film. That I guess is the more auteur school of filmmaking, while this is the more Hal Ashby or Mike Nichols type of film, which I think is a very valid way of making movies.

HollywoodChicago.com: Even though you've lived a certain winning narrative of your own, you've made a movie about a guy who gets lucky and unlucky. Are you interested in directly subverting the skill narrative with "The Gambler," maybe saying that life is not about being #1?

Wyatt: Yeah he's born into luck, and in a way he's trapped in a gilded cage. That's a tough sell for a character because many people would

turn around and say, 'you should be so lucky, what's the problem?' There's a character who calls him out on that, saying, 'how come when you have everything you are working so hard to get to nothing?' It's a very anti-western philosophy, which is that the real wealth comes from inside, it's the spiritual wealth that he's looking for. I think all of us, it doesn't even need to be within our artistic endeavors, it could be any walk of life, any of us can benefit from taking a beat and thinking, 'Okay, what is it that I'm really trying to achieve here?' Because personal happiness doesn't come from wealth or material possession or looks or talent. It comes from a sense of place or a sense of self, and that's what "The Gambler" is about in a funny interesting way. And I think Hollywood is an interesting place in that you can very easily lose sight of that. Success can create amazing opportunities but it can also bring a set of confines which make your decisions a little murkier I think.

There's an image right at the end of the movie which is very specific to something I wanted to say. It involves him standing in front of a sign that says "Vacant Lot." That to me was back to zero, he's a clean slate. So this movie could totally bomb, and I'll be back to zero.

"The Gambler" opens everywhere on December 25th. Featuring Mark Wahlberg, Jessica Lange, Brie Larson, John Goodman, Michael Kenneth Williams and George Kennedy. Screenplay adapted by William Monahan. Directed by Rupert Wyatt. Rated "R"



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