

## A CONVERSATION WITH DIRECTOR ADAM SALKY AND WRITER DAVID BRIND

### ORIGINS

Adam Salky: David and I met at Columbia University's graduate film program. There's an end of the first year project where everyone directs a script that someone else wrote. David produced and we shot the 16-minute short in Philadelphia in June 2004.

The short ends with this incredible, totally unexpected moment of connection between these two boys. It definitely left us wondering what happened to the characters the next day at school.

David Brind: And that was the question we got asked after every screening. What happens next?

*The short DARE screened at approximately 50 domestic and international festivals. Strand Releasing bought the film for the "Boys Life" DVD series.*

Salky: Consequently, we decided to develop DARE into a feature. David started writing it in the fall of the second year of school.

Brind: Since I also produced the short, I was on set during the entire shoot. One night I was watching the monitor as Adam directed a small scene between Ben ("Light Boy") and Alexa, a peripheral character (in the short). After each take, I kept running over to Adam to talk about how important this moment was -- how it was about the connection between a closeted boy and his best female friend, who totally knew and accepted him, even without the words to say so. Rightfully, Adam alerted me that though this was interesting, it wasn't really part of the story (of the short). But it set something off for me that never went away -- about who Alexa was, and how she perceived this. What kind of relationship does she have with Ben? How does she see Johnny? Alexa took root in my brain and became the jumping off point for the feature script. And that was kind of the beginning of me seeing it as a larger world.

### THEMES

Salky: DARE is a story about the need to take chances when you're young in order to find out who you are, or who you're not. I wanted to tell a story where an audience could feel the intensity of adolescent desire -- especially when directed at people who aren't really attainable. I think everyone has that experience. It felt to me like a universal story.



- Brind: The story's fraught with a lot of emotions that I like writing about – desire, tension, conflict, shame, joy. Although it's not autobiographical, the characters are very real and personal to me. Certainly you can't write about a period of life that you experienced without some of it seeping through.
- Salky: David's writing is incredibly visual and full of personal details. Of course, it was a fictional story, but it came from something very real.
- Brind: High school is an intense period of life in America, when we're all obsessed with how others perceive us, how we are treated, where we stand. Part of the rite of passage is the moment in which we realize that our actions have effects, even indelible ones, on others. This is something that Alexa, Ben and Johnny all come to find out in DARE.
- Salky: It is my hope that audiences will also get some laughs in DARE. I treated these first big, life choices that the characters make seriously. But it was also important to remember that they're 17 years old. These are the first choices, not the last. With that in mind, I tried to create some levity throughout the film. Since DARE deals with a lot of the awkwardness of adolescent sexuality, I wanted humor and comedy to come from that. Most of the laughs in the film are from tension and release, and the audience re-living the anxiety of those first, fumbling steps toward experiencing sexuality.

## **STRUCTURE**

- Brind: I really liked the idea of following each character in a way that you could really get inside their heads. So that once you were with Alexa, you never left her. You couldn't suddenly be in Ben's room and see what he was thinking. I thought it would enable me in my writing and ultimately Adam in his directing to unpeel, unmask and kind of go deeper into the characters. I wanted to be able to show the characters' intimate details.

## **VISUALS**

- Salky: Through the course of the film, I hope the audience feels an emotional progression, not just with the stories and the characters, but also with the visuals and the music.

Alexa's act was shot to be very bright and somewhat reminiscent of a high school film that we might know. It suits Alexa's character -- organized, put-together (at least on the outside), structured. I also wanted the first act to feel familiar, so audiences could be comfortable with the story at the outset.

At the passing of the baton to Ben's act, the visuals become a little more adult. The colors are a little darker, more mature.

When we switch to Johnny's act, the camera work is almost entirely hand held, except for certain scenes that take place in Ben's house. The colors in Johnny's act are muted and stark.

For the scene at Courtney's house, near the end, I hope the visuals build to a crescendo that leaves the audience a little unhinged, a little unsteady.

I also wanted the scenes concerning the very first intimate sexual experiences of the main characters to feel as real as possible, with all of the adolescent awkwardness and thrills intact.

The style of each of these scenes is very specific to each character's act. The one that takes place in Alexa's act is very constructed. It took an entire night to film. It required 20 shots. Ben's is very honest and matter of fact. Because at that moment, Ben is able to get what he wants sexually through honesty. The one in Johnny's act is much messier and realistic.

## **CHARACTERS/ACTORS**

### **Alexa Walker/EMMY ROSSUM**

Salky: Alexa is very pretty, but one of the things that's integral to her character is that she doesn't feel comfortable in her own skin. She doesn't understand why she can make straight As and be president of every club, but can't feel normal in social situations.

Especially after watching her stunning audition tape, we knew Emmy understood Alexa and her conflict.

Brind: She just kind of took over the role and embodied it. She completely internalized the part.

### **Ben Berger/ASHLEY SPRINGER**

Salky: Ashley Springer came in for an early reading of the script. We were just floored by him.

Brind: Ben feels different. Ashley played Ben (in that first reading) differently than any of us expected Ben to be played. We could never get him out of our head.

### **Johnn Drake/ZACH GILFORD**

Salky: Like all the characters in DARE, Johnny is subtle and complex. Especially in the scenes that take place in Ben's home, we see Johnny in a new light. We get a glimpse of how Johnny is not the person we expect him to be. He's just not the jock, the cool guy, a one-dimensional character. He's actually very complex.

Zach has these qualities, and the ability to create a character with range. In the beginning of DARE, you will believe that he is the jock character, but towards the end you will be surprised by where Zach takes Johnny.

### **Courtney/ROONEY MARA**

Brind: Courtney is ahead of her time, which allows her to be the popular cool girl. But she is also never quite at home with any one group.

Salky: She's also an instigator. When you are an adolescent and making your first choices and taking your first risks to figure out who you are, a lot of those choices are inherently selfish. I think that applies to all the characters and their journeys, but also to Courtney, because she's instigating stuff for her own entertainment. She doesn't sort of see what could happen, or what does happen.

Brind: And the way Rooney Mara played it could easily have called for a fourth chapter.

### **Adults, Parents**

Salky: The parents in David's script felt very close to my own family and those of my friends. I've seen these people before in my life.

Brind: I think they're extremely well intentioned - especially Ben's mother Ruth and Deidre, Alexa's mother. They care deeply and passionately about their children

Alexa and Ben's parents trust their kids. Whether or not they fuck up along the way, they know Ben and Alexa are going to be OK. Johnny's a different story.

### **Ruth Berger/ANA GASTEYER**

Brind: Ana is known for her comedic abilities, and she certainly gets to show them off in DARE. But the character of Ruth, like the kids in the film, is complex. She loves and supports her son, but desperately longs to change him. She is human and strikes a balance between being nurturing to Ben and slightly uncomfortable about who he is shaping up to be. Ana found that balance naturally, with both warmth and the occasional moments of maternal aggression.

Salky: Ana infused the character of Ruth with a warmth that really brought her to life. She created a mom that was so familiar to me, it gave me chills.

**Dr. Serena Moore/SANDRA BERNHARD**

Brind: I wrote that role for Sandra. I think she is extreme talent in so many ways. And she has chops as a dramatic actress that we were excited to showcase.

Salky: I've been a huge fan of Sandra's since I was a kid. In DARE, she plays a role that is very surprising. It's a performance that is outside of what she's known for.

**Grant Mason/ALAN CUMMING**

Salky: The character of Grant is someone who is a very accomplished actor, with a command of the stage, and someone Alexa looks up to. Because of his background, Alan was a perfect fit for the role. The moment Grant steps onto the stage with Alexa, it's immediately clear how far Alexa is from accomplishing her goal of becoming an actress. Alan made that possible.

Brind: Alan Cumming's intensity, honesty and unflinching directness as both an actor and a person brought the character of Grant to life in a way that astonished us. He understood Grant Matson and the script on a visceral level.