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Adam Salky

by [Rachael Scott](#)
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Dare is a film by Adam Salky about a girl who falls for a boy who thinks he's straight until he kisses another boy who happens to be the girl's best friend. Then he wonders if he might be gay too, or even bisexual. He simply isn't sure, but he knows he's lonely and wants to be friends with both of them.

The girl is played by *The Phantom of the Opera's* Emmy Rossum, the boy by *Friday Night Lights's* Zach Gilford, and Ben Berger from *Teeth* is the gay best friend. Alan Cumming and Sandra Bernhard come along for the ride.

Rachael Scott spoke to the *Dare's* director about his film.

Please tell me about the genesis and history of the film. How did the idea for it come about, what attracted you to David Brind's script and how did the pair of you manage to get it made?

David and I met on Columbia University's graduate film program. There's an end of the first year project where everyone directs a short film that someone else wrote. I thought David's was the best in the pool and we made the short version of *Dare* together that summer. We had a great collaboration and the short left us with a strong "what happens next?" feeling, so we decided to develop it into a feature.

David's script took risks with the adolescent need to break out, to grow at all costs and figure out who you are (or aren't). I had never read anything like it before. It had an inventive structure and felt like it was about my life and people I knew even though I didn't write it.

Dare took almost five years to get made. David and I would get together once a week and do whatever we could to push the ball forward. We had lots of to-do lists, story notes, producers to contact, schemes to raise money. Things really got rolling when we were able to attach Mary Jane Skalski (*The Visitor*, *The Station Agent*) to produce. She was our first choice! A year later we were shooting.

This is your first feature length film, so how did you manage to persuade such iconic stars as Alan Cumming and Sandra Bernhard to appear in your film and what was it like working with them?

Both actors came through David actually (and luckily). Sandra and David are friends and he directed her in a short film a couple of years before *Dare*. He wrote the role of Johnny's psychiatrist for her.

Alan was a bit more of a surprise. His role, Grant Matson, the famous alumnus of the high school in *Dare*, was originally Grace Matson. The only trouble was we were having a very hard time casting a woman for the role because of scheduling conflicts. It just so happened that David had just directed Alan in a reading of a play, and I think it was one of our producers who said, "Hey, what if we made it a guy and asked Alan?" We showed him the script and he agreed! This turned out to be one of those 'happy accidents' you hear about so often in making a film.

It's always nerve wracking to work with actors of that calibre and experience, especially as a first time feature director. I remember on Alan's first day we had a technical rehearsal at

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the theatre where we were going to shoot his five-page scene with Emmy Rossum. We had just met and it was already time to rehearse. I then realised that the whole crew was sitting in the seats of the theatre, watching Alan, Emmy and I on stage about to go through the blocking so they could figure out how to set up the lights. We started to rehearse and I made a small suggestion about the blocking and Alan liked it!

From then the whole scene started to play out as I had imagined, Emmy and Alan were excited, and I exhaled a sigh of relief (internally). The whole crew and producers saw it all happen. It was a big moment in the production for me.

"David's script took risks with the adolescent need to break out, to grow at all costs and figure out who you are (or aren't). I had never read anything like it before."

Can you tell me how you found your three leads? Did you have them in mind from the beginning or did they stand out during the audition process?

Casting a high school movie is a unique challenge because the leads are so young, and there are very few actors that age with a large body of work to research. As a result most of our cast came from the audition process.

Both Emmy and Zach had the same manager who was a big fan of the script, and we had a fantastic casting director, Kerry Barden. He cast Ashley Springer as Ben in a pre-production reading of the screenplay. I was floored by him and cast him on the spot in my mind.

One of Kerry's most exciting finds was Rooney Mara, who plays Courtney in *Dare*. She was Erica Albright in *The Social Network*, and was recently cast as Lisbeth Salander in the US version of *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. I think we are going to see big things from her and *Dare* is one of her very first roles. Kerry also introduced us to the extremely talented and very funny Ana Gasteyer, who does a wonderful and surprising dramatic turn at Johnny's mother.



Johnny is a very complicated character. What made Zach right for the role?

Zach had that perfect combination of qualities. Johnny is subtle and complex on the inside, but on the outside he projects a protective shell - this image of the effortless cool guy who I think everyone knew in high school.

Of course that type of person is human too, and we see his layers of protection peeled away in *Dare*, especially in the scenes that take place in Ben's home, where we get a glimpse of how Johnny is not the person we expect him to be. He's not just the jock, the cool guy, a one-dimensional character. Zach has the ability to create a character with range.

In the beginning of *Dare*, you will believe that he is that jock character, but towards the end you will be surprised by where he takes Johnny. Some of these qualities are his in real life, for example he's very athletic and physically attractive, but there's definitely something magnetic and complicated going on underneath that exterior, which made him perfect for the role.

Hollywood makes oodles of films aimed at teen audiences. What did you hope you could say that would be different from all of the others?

Yes, there are many Hollywood teen films, but they almost never go below the surface of their characters, which is a shame because there are few times in one's life that are more complex, dramatic, perplexing and fascinating than adolescence.

In some ways this was what David and I wanted to address in *Dare*. The characters in *Dare* start out as characters you might recognise from a Hollywood teen film, but they soon become very real. There's Alexa, the good girl, Ben, the outsider, and Johnny, the cool guy/bad boy. In *Dare* you get a look at these familiar characters, but each gets a twist that completely subverts who you thought they were and what they were capable of.

"One of the interesting aspects of my collaboration with David is that he is gay and I am straight. This very fact didn't affect production, but we do each bring a unique perspective on sexuality and that was perfect for *Dare*."

Which teen/high school dramas have you particularly admired?

I'm a huge fan of *Y Tu Mama Tambien* and *Election*. Those are two of my favourite films of all time.

What message would you and David like to get across to the audience? What advice would you give to a teenager, or adult for that matter, struggling with their

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sexuality?

For me, the message of the film is that you have to take risks in order to figure out who you are or are not, but that there is a dark side to those actions. However, if you are not mindful, self discovery can come at the expense of friendships, the well being of others and even your own self worth.

Each of the characters in *Dare* has a moment of "daring" where they make a choice to break out and become the person they want to be. It's those moments in life that help to define who we are. Those moments are also filled with all of the drama, tension and adolescent awkwardness of that age and that was something that was very important for me to communicate to audiences. There's been nothing quite as thrilling as watching *Dare* with an audience and seeing them squirm, laugh and relive that adolescent desire and awkwardness – that moment before the first kiss, before you make your move - that makes the hair rise on the back of your neck.

One of the interesting aspects of my collaboration with David is that he is gay and I am straight. This very fact didn't affect production, but we do each bring a unique perspective on sexuality and that was perfect for *Dare* because a broad spectrum of sexuality is addressed in the story.

I'm not sure I'm the one to give advice on the subject of struggling with your sexuality, but I will say that gay or straight or bi, if you can just hang in there you are going to accept yourself and, if you can hang in there even longer, you will find someone else who will accept you for who you are, but the over all lesson in *Dare* is that you have to do the looking. You have to play an active role in your own growth. You may fail, you may succeed, but only by doing can we truly figure out who we are - or aren't.

**What are your favourite gay-themed films?**

Of the films I have seen, I think *The Edge of Seventeen*, *Brokeback Mountain* and *Mysterious Skin* are great, memorable films.

What were the main challenges of shooting the three-way love scene?

This is a question I am often asked. There are certainly challenges on the day. You must make sure everyone is comfortable and address any issues up front and honestly. A reduced crew is helpful and a very detailed blocking so the actors know exactly what is going to happen is a good idea as well.

But in truth, shooting a sex scene is an elaborate process that begins at the first meeting between the director and the actor before the movie is even made. At that moment the actor is thinking, 'Is this director prepared, does he know what he wants, can I trust him/her?' The actor is also thinking about the script and their connection to it (since David wrote such a wonderful script there were no problems there).

It's the job of the director to be the person that an actor would trust with intimate material. If you're not prepared, and the actor knows it, then when that shoot day comes you better watch out.

I was very fortunate in that my collaboration with all of the actors in *Dare* was very strong from the beginning. They wanted to be there, they believed in the project, they were comfortable with me and they had good reason to be because I had been preparing the film for almost four years. So when the time came to shoot those scenes, they approached me and asked me to promise them that I would not be afraid to tell them when it didn't look real – that they would go back and do it again and again until they got it right. That was a big moment in our collaboration – when it was clear that the mutual trust was there to go into shooting that kind of intimate material. They were invested, they believed in the material and they were willing to trust me to capture it. I'll never forget that moment.

"It's the job of the director to be the person that an actor would trust with intimate material. If you're not prepared, and the actor knows it, then when that shoot day comes you better watch out."

How did you come up with the visual style of the film?

The central concept behind the visual style of *Dare* was 'growing up', or 'maturation.' The characters begin the story as innocents in a way, and they step into young adulthood by the end. There is a real emotional and psychological progression to the individual character stories, and the visual style and music choices were intended to support that.

Alexa's act was shot to be very bright and somewhat reminiscent of a Hollywood high school film that we might know. It suits Alexa's character – organised, put-together (at least on the outside), structured. It also suits the psychological state of the Alexa in the

beginning. She is still very much a young girl, and the brightness and youthful colours were intended to support this innocence.

At the passing of the baton to Ben's act, the characters have begun a transition into a new level of maturity so the visuals become a little more adult. The colours are a little darker, more mature.

Then we switch to Johnny's act and the camera work is almost entirely hand held, and the colours are muted and stark. At this point in the story the character relationships has become so real that I wanted the visual style to feel the same way.

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. When Alexa loses her virginity to Johnny the visual style is very constructed, just like her character's plan to make that event happen. It took an entire night to film and required 20 setups. Ben's intimate scene is very honest and matter of fact - just a couple of simple shots. Because at that moment, Ben is able to get what he wants sexually through honesty. The final threesome in Johnny's act is much messier and realistic.



Who's an actor you'd kill to work with?

There are so many - Annette Bening, Cate Blanchett, Mark Ruffalo, Ian McKellan, Christian Bale, the *Dare* cast (again).

Who would you list as your main influences?

Alfonso Cuarón, for his bold, visual ingenuity and raw, yet poetic, story tone, Alfred Hitchcock for his precision, and for knowing exactly where and when to put the camera, and Ang Lee for his attention to subtlety and performance, as well as his career, which has taken him across many genres.

If you were stuck on a desert island with a DVD player and only one film to watch, which would it be?

Y Tu Mama Tambien – that way I could enjoy a great film over and over again, and learn to speak Spanish.

What will you be working on next?

My next film is a dramatic thriller called *The Good Brother*. It's about two grifter brothers who have been taking advantage of widows until the younger brother falls in love with their next victim and derails the plan.

It was written by Pablo Fenjves (*Man on a Ledge*) and will be produced by Mary Jane Skalski. It's a complicated character story wrapped up in a simple, yet elementally, suspenseful premise.

You're told that your next film must have one 'product placement' on board and you can pick the product. What would it be?

Maybe Yamaha musical instruments - I'm in the market for a good digital piano and I hear their sound is up there with the best. Of course, I could always use more Apple products in my life. Then again, your question doesn't imply that I'm going to actually get to take the product home, so if it has to be unselfish then I would say solar panels. You know, I would want to take that home too. Is this the longest answer to this question you have ever received?

"Each of the characters in *Dare* has a moment of 'daring' where they make a choice to break out and become the person they want to be. It's those moments in life that help to define who we are."

Yes. How do you see yourself evolving as a filmmaker and artist in the next decade or so?

I would be honoured if you would watch the movies I make in that 10-year period and then reflect back to me the answer to that question. At this point, I am just following my heart. If I am drawn to a piece of material then I don't spend too much time questioning why. I suspect I will have made films in several genres in the next 10 years.

If you could share one massive lesson that you learned while making *Dare*, what would it be and what, if anything, will you be doing differently for your next feature?

OK. I don't want to be held to this by the producers of a future project, but the biggest philosophical lesson I learned is that creativity is born out of financial restriction. The less

money you have, the more you have to really hone and focus your ideas down to the bare essentials and think creatively. That thought and effort is where the best storytelling choices are made.

In *Dare*, we lost the location for Johnny's house about a week before we were supposed to start shooting those scenes. Over 30 pages of material and three of the most crucial moments of the story were to take place there, and all of those scenes were already planned, storyboarded and designed to take place at the lost location. The new location, which was essentially forced on me out of lack of time and necessity, seemed (at first) to be completely unworkable.

Despite what the location was lacking and the very little time we had to plan out those scenes, the crew really banded together and we all rose to the occasion to make those scenes happen. In the end, those 30 pages of crucial moments came out *better* than what was planned at the original location. How is that possible? The extreme restrictions of time and money forced us to dig deep and become more resourceful and creative – we found a new and better way.

On my next film, during those moments of turmoil when it seems that all is lost, I will know to be as flexible as possible and to look out for the creative opportunities in a challenging situation.

Dare [2011]

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