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Joshua Leonard

18 Dec 2009

Joshua Leonard is one of the two stars of *Humpday*. Lynn Shelton's indie success that everyone's talking about because it's an usual take on the gay/straight behaviour. It's about two straight guys who decide to have sex with each other so they can make a porno movie. Neither is in the closet and there's not a hint of homophobia throughout.

Leonard is one of them. He plays Andrew, a bit of a hippie who failed to grow up and has been "discovering" himself ever since he left college. The other is his best mate Ben, played by Mark Duplass. Ben has a steady job, is married and trying for a baby with his wife. Ben has no such identity crisis. Or does he?

But it's not just about that. What emerges more dominantly than questionable sexuality is the brittle nature of the male ego.

Rachael Scott chatted to Leonard, best known in the UK for his role in *The Blair Witch Project* many moons ago, to discuss what he thought about copping off with a bloke.

Can you tell me about your character and where he's at in his life when the film starts?

Andrew is pretty lost and self-delusional, and I think the only difference between the beginning and the end of the film is that by the end he's still pretty lost, but he's more self aware about that.

My theory on the elements of myself that are in Andrew and friends I know is that they've lived a life that has been closer to his. There's something really wonderful about the idea of wanting to go out and explore the world - to experience everything and really give it a shot. But, at some point, and I'm sure there are exceptions to this rule, if you're doing the same thing in your mid-30s that you were doing at 22, somewhere along the way motivations have changed.

It might look the same from the outside, but somewhere psychologically you've switched from exploration into hiding and avoidance. I think Andrew's living pretty inorganically. He's relying on his front - the character he's created is his sexual defence and armour to the world at large.

I gather there was no script to work from.

No. There was a very fleshed out treatment that Lynn (Shelton), Mark and I came up with where we arced out the background of the film and mapped out individual scenes, but there was no actual dialogue written. We knew what our objectives and our obstacles were, but how we got there, what we said, how that manifested was completely up to the spontaneity of the moment.

"Truly, the treatment just said, 'Two guys check into the motel room and try and make an art film together'. And we filmed it exactly like that. We checked into a motel room on the last day of shooting and shot it."

Did you have workshops where you collaborated and thrashed this stuff out?

We didn't really do any rehearsal at all, but we did have a lot of conversations. Lynn came up with the idea and went to Mark. Then Mark brought me in and then we all got together and started brainstorming. It was all the rudiments of this ridiculous, asinine concept of two straight guys trying to make a gay porn and then our question was, 'How can we take this hyperbolic high concept and engineer it into something more human?' So that's how we came up with the structure of things.

Did you know what would happen when you went into the motel room to shoot the porn movie?

Absolutely not. In fact, that was the only scene we didn't map out or hypothesise at all. We were shooting the film in sequence and what we didn't want to do was start the movie angling towards a place that we had to land. So every other scene was mapped out in terms of what would come up, except the last scene - truly, the treatment just said, 'Two guys check into the motel room and try and make an art film together'. And we filmed it exactly like that. We checked into a motel room on the last day of shooting and shot it.



So as you didn't know whether your character Andrew was going to have sex with Ben or not, and without giving any spoilers away, how did you psychologically prepare to have simulated sex with



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I'd never kissed a man before, much less had sex with a man, but I knew about the style of the film we were making. It was set up to accommodate the most organic thing that could happen in any given moment and Lynn really set the template for that in terms of allowing us a tremendous amount of latitude to create our characters.

Then our DP (director of photography) lit the whole room so we could go wherever we wanted. So I guess honestly going into the scene I felt like if I get in there and it feels great and feels right we'll go as long as it feels good. All the really hardcore penetration shots ended up on the cutting room floor! *[Laughs]*.

So what did it feel like when you kissed Mark?

Erm, I was in an absolute blackout when I kissed Mark. From a psychological standpoint, prior to kissing Mark, it was a bit like standing on the edge of a high dive about to jump into a really cold pool. And then I just kind of shut my eyes and went there and I don't remember much.

Ah, come on. You can't have forgotten.

No, no. I'm being very honest. It was aggressive. It was a micro-representation of what these guys were doing the whole movie, which was taking a very moronic, alpha male approach to something that's completely chemical and feelings based. Yeah! We're gonna kiss now! *[In macho voice]*.

Potentially the idea of *Humpday* could have upset the gay community. It must have been difficult to avoid that and make the concept seem realistic.

If anything, our every attempt was to turn the microscope on ourselves and certainly pull out our own fears and fallibilities more so than judging anybody else or making fun of anybody. There was no interest in that and, at the end of the day, it's not a film about sexual politics. Although I'm sure someone could take it and shoehorn it into that, that's not the film we made. That would be more about individual interpretation than it is about what we were attempting to explore.

"The one critique we got from a gay gentleman in one of the festival audiences was that no self-respecting gay man would want to watch a porn starring Mark and I."**What sort of reaction have you had from the gay press?**

I'm really wary of using the term 'gay press' because I think that cuts individual opinion out of it. There certainly hasn't been a confab amongst gay publications where they've decided to support or destroy us.

Much the same as the 'straight press', some people like it and some people don't. I haven't run across too many people who have been offended by the film and traditionally when people are offended I feel it has more to do with them and their baggage than with the film we made. The one critique we got from a gay gentleman in one of the festival audiences was that no self-respecting gay man would want to watch a porn starring Mark and I.

I'm sure it wouldn't be that bad! *[Laughs]*.

Well, thank you. That did wonders for my self-esteem.

At one point in the film Andrew attempts a threesome with two bisexual women and was rejected in favour of a dildo. How did that make your character feel?

Both characters are running up against the reality of who they fancy themselves to be as to who they really are and it's just another slap in the face for Andrew in his journey to self-discovery and self-honesty.

He walks into that scene to prove his machismo and walks out realising that, for as much as he calls himself open minded and an adventurer/explorer, a couple of rubber cocks on a bed with two girls is actually completely petrifying to him. It absolutely challenges his preconception of his own masculinity.

**Mark has a moment of complete honesty where he admits to an attraction to a video store clerk in his youth. Have you ever had any similar experiences?**

I always get hung up on when it moves into the physicality of it. I was standing outside my office with my producer the other day and this little skating kid rode by and, without even thinking, I turned round and said, 'That was a beautiful boy'. But as soon as I start playing the tape out into kissing, it loses me. I don't know myself well enough, but I think part of it may be just jealousy, like, 'Wow. I wish I looked like that'.

You've been in a lot of movies, but you're not that well-known, well not over here anyway...

[Laughs].

It's true, but I'm sure that will change by the end of the year. Has *Humpday* changed that much for you in the US yet?

I think within the group of people that I really look up to, there is some recognition and that's the old school – to be recognised amongst your peers for something that you're personally proud of. Are they banging down the door to make me a movie star? Absolutely not. Do I really care? Not at all.

There's still time. *Humpday's* not been released in Europe yet. Don't lose hope.

If you guys ever want a pudgy bearded American...

Can you do a British accent?

I can try. I can play a British imposter. Or an American imposter in Britain.

One of your next projects is called *Bitter Feast*, which is about a chef who takes revenge on one of his critics...

Although I think they've just changed the title to *Bad Chef*.

So what's the bitchiest thing anyone's ever said about you?

I know everybody says this but I don't read reviews. I think I only ever wind up reading the good ones because the ones I read are the ones people forward to me. I think my friends keep me protected from that a little, but I'm sure there is a shit tonne of critical feedback, deservedly so, on things that I've done in the past and I'm just a guy trying to get better at what I do.

I read a couple of reviews of *Humpday* where there was nothing I remember that particularly singled me out, but it was generally mean spirited and I believe that critics are being overly mean which has far more to do with their own personal agenda than something that I did. If it's an objective critique of something I did that could have been better, I'm always open to it.

Everybody wants to sound smart and like they've got a great opinion. Sometimes I think in lots of arenas, and it certainly happens for actors, that you lose the plot a little bit trying to show off.

"Are they banging down the door to make me a movie star? Absolutely not. Do I really care? Not at all."

What's your porn name?

What's that?

It's the name of the road you grew up on and the name of your first pet.

It's a fantastic porn name. It's Cheetah Saxton.

Yeah, that would work.

Pretty good, right? What's yours?

Michaelmas Graham. I think that's pretty cool.

Yeah. It's great. I just picture you doing exotic island porn.

I am very exotic. Which words or phrases do you most overuse?

I wish I used the word 'dude' less because whenever I hear myself back talking in an interview the amount of times I use 'dude' really annoys me. And I had an ex-girlfriend who pointed out that I start many sentences with the phrase, 'Here's the thing', which is often my own jaundiced opinion but I present it as objective fact.

I don't think you said 'dude' in this interview up until just now.

I must have.

I'm sure you didn't. What animal best describes your personality?

When I shave and smile the right way I really look like a frog. I don't know if that describes my personality but I feel that's what I look like.

What song would you like played at your funeral?

Tom Waits's 'I Hope I Don't Fall in Love With You'.



If you were stuck on a desert island with only one book to read which would it be?

I can't think of anything that I've really read in my adult life and I refuse to say *Catcher in the Rye*. I don't know I can give you a good answer on that one. I would put *Master and the Margarita* up there, though.

What would be your last supper?

A slice of Nina's pizza on 8th Street and Avenue A in New York.

Wouldn't you want a whole one?

Sure, I'll take a whole one if you're offering. And a vanilla malted milkshake.

If you could swap places with one person living or dead who would it be?

Nobody.

What's on your bedside table?

A three-foot stack of books and a stack of DVDs that I might never get to.

What's in your DVD collection?

Boogie Nights. Krzysztof Kieslowski. Wes Anderson's *Bottle Rocket*, *The Lives of Others*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, **Derek Jarman**, love his stuff.

Is there a question you wish interviewers would ask but never do?

Would you like a glass of water?

Don't they?

Never in phone interviews.

Would you like a glass of water? [Laughs].

Yes. I'd love a glass of water. Could you do something about that?

Great. That's it now. Thanks very much for your time.

Feel free to drop me a text if you need a follow-up. But don't even try to sell my mobile phone number on eBay.

One of my questions was going to be how are you going to stop your ego running wild once you get more famous?! [Laughs].

I think keeping it mitigated with a healthy sense of self-loathing should work. [Laughs].

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Humpday opens in UK cinemas on 18 December 2009.

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