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## Entertainment : Film & TV : Interviews

### Kyle Patrick Alvarez

03 Dec 2010

**They say phone sex gets easier with practice. That was certainly the case for *The Hurt Locker's* Brian Geraghty when he starts chatting to a mysterious caller with a sexy voice called Nicole.**

Kyle Patrick Alvarez's fantastic first feature, *Easier With Practice*, tells the story of the intimate relationship between two people who have never met, or even seen each other. But that doesn't stop Davy and Nicole having sex as often as they can – on the phone. After weeks of intimate chats they agree to meet and Nicole is *nothing* like Davy expected.

*Easier With Practice* is based on a short story written by Davy Rothbart for GQ magazine. It won the Best New International Feature Award at the Edinburgh Film Festival and the Someone to Watch Award at the 2010 Independent Spirit Awards.

Remarkably, Alvarez has made an honest and sensitive film about phone sex minus the expected lurid titillation. It's anything but a dull watch though thanks to a perceptive performance from its leading man Geraghty, who instils Davy with nothing but realism and understanding. Geraghty's nuanced turn taps into the fears of the delicate male ego in a way rarely seen on screen.

Davy is never relegated to sad sack status or a man who can only get his rocks off with an anonymous voice. Admittedly, he's unlikely to appear in any end of year Top Ten Seducers of the Silver Screen lists, but his awkward ineptitude with women, and himself, is what makes him such an appealing character to watch.

Rachael Scott spoke to the 27-year old gay director over the phone at his home in Los Angeles. The interview below contains major spoilers and information you will not want to know if you haven't seen the film.

**How close does your film stick to Davy Rothbart's autobiographical essay in GQ magazine?**

Pretty much the main structure of the story is there. He was on a road trip promoting his successful magazine so I changed that. The character is the biggest change and the middle act when he goes home was all written and invented on my part.

When Davy agreed to let me have the rights to the project I told him that my interest was in making a film out of the story, not necessarily a true version of his life or a Davy Rothbart movie. The idea was to take the way he approached his experience and try to translate that.

**"Some people see it as a really sad, depressing and lonely ending and other people think it's hopeful. Our message was to leave it open so that however people interpret modern communication they'll take what they will from it."**

**How much consultation did you have with Davy on the film?**

He was really interested in it and he's interested in filmmaking so he read the script beforehand and gave me some notes. He spent about a week on set observing and giving his thoughts. He talked to Brian and gave him some ideas and insight into what it was like.

**I was on tenterhooks when Davy meets the real Nicole but he doesn't react quite how you expect him to. Is that exactly what happened with the real Davy?**

Absolutely. I think that because Davy is a writer, part of him and his reaction was fuelled by curiosity as a writer. When I was reading the article and when it got to that moment I kind of opened my eyes a little and thought, 'Oh, I can see where this is going. This is going to be a cautionary tale or something like that', but what drew me into it and made me want to make it into a film was his reaction, the amount of sensitivity and related humanity, the way he treated and portrayed Aaron. That was fascinating to me and he became the hero of the story as opposed to the villain.

It was a challenging balance to create especially with the actors. We had to make it interesting yet believable. Taken by surprise but still compassionate and trying to get those two things in there were definitely challenges for the scene.



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**It must have been difficult for Brian acting with only a handset for much of the film and pretending to masturbate during the other half. Can you talk about working with him and what made him right for the role?**

We saw a tonne of guys for the part and he was a sure bet. I'd seen him in some supporting parts before and what we were really looking for is someone who had a natural likeability and charisma, but could still carry the screen. He had that.

The majority of the film is him talking on the phone on his own which was really challenging. So we had a really quiet set and it just took that extra level of concentration. He was aware that we couldn't cut away to inserts of the other person.

The sustained takes definitely put a lot of pressure on the actor but I think they also bring a lot of good things because they require the actor to really get into the zone as opposed to just recording a line and cutting. It really kept him in the moment and he did that so well. He was comfortable enough to improvise and come up with things on the fly, keep the scenes moving. He knew the script better than I did.

**I'm sure clever editing was involved to make those scenes more interesting.**

Even though we only have a handful of cuts compared to most films every time you do cut means it's that much more important. Especially during those phone conversations we had to make sure that every time we cut it hit the right beat.

**"It wasn't about whether Davy was gay or not, it was questioning whether he was even capable of being intimate or not. And that's something that comes way before sexuality."**

**There are lots of people like Davy who find it easier to connect with a stranger through phone sex or internet chat rooms. Why do you think Davy can be so intimate with Nicole when he is so awkward around women in the flesh? And what do you think the story says about the way we connect with each other now?**

I remember reading an article a long time ago and there was a statistic where they polled a bunch of teenagers and they asked them if they'd ever told someone something online that they wouldn't have told them in person. It was a 70-80 percent yes. Now imagine now, 10 years later, that's probably a 90-95 percent yes.

While there's something worrisome about that because we're communicating primarily less face to face, there's also an aspect that's positive where at least we're saying it, at least we're getting it out there. And I think that's something that Davy's story touched upon for me. He needs to find a way to get it in real life, but that's not to say he didn't learn something from talking to Nicole and the hope that we have at the end of the film is that he got something from it that he'll bring into his real life.

Some people see it as a really sad, depressing and lonely ending and other people think it's hopeful. Our message was to leave it open so that however people interpret modern communication they'll take what they will from it.

**I suppose it depends on what he does with that experience in the future. Does Davy Rothbart have a girlfriend now?**

I believe so. He's one of those guys who treats himself with so much humility and sincerity and even his Found Magazine project and any of the articles that you read, there's something so sweet about him. Although in real life he's much more social than Davy in the film. There's a part of him that I hope we captured, which is his innate kindness and just wanting to see the good in people and that's what drew me, not only to the way he writes, but to Davy as a person in real life.



**I think it's very easy to empathise and to sympathise with the character without patronising him. You can see his awkwardness but it's an endearing quality. You like him.**

That's a tough thing because there are a lot of films that rely on making the character a nerd for the want of a better phrase. I wanted to create sympathy. We tried really hard to convince that this person really could exist in real life and I personally suffer from my own social anxieties and I wanted to try and put that into the character.

Brian did that so well with moments that weren't even really scripted. Like when he's at the birthday party and everyone gets up and he's left on the sofa by himself. His performance there wasn't anything we'd planned and that's one of my favourite bits in the movie because he really got it.

**What do you think about the way the male ego and sexuality are portrayed in cinema in general?**

Well, that's one of my main concerns and the next film I'm trying to get made is about that. Right now it really fascinates me. Showing male weakness is taboo in many ways and I think there's definitely unexplored territory there. I'm really interested in the idea that men can be weak, but still be strong characters and still want to fight for something. I think American society sees that as a feminine quality, but I do think men have that in them.

In terms of how that relates to sexuality, what's interesting to me is it wasn't about whether Davy was gay or not, it was questioning whether he was even capable of being intimate or not. And that's something that comes way before sexuality.

I was trying to pull away from the emphasis on gender preference and more on the humanity of sexual complications and not feeling comfortable enough with yourself to be in a comfortable sexual relationship. In some kind of perfect world when gay politics will hopefully be an afterthought, what will we be left with? We'll still have issues and complications that don't have to do with gender preference but have to do with who we are inside. That's interesting to me.

**"Showing male weakness is taboo in many ways and I think there's definitely unexplored territory there."**

**Many directors who are gay make films about the struggle to come out of the closet or gay issues as such. As a gay man and a director, do you feel obligated to make a political or social statement in your work?**

I don't feel obligated, but I feel motivated if that makes sense. I wouldn't say every film I'll ever make will have a gay storyline or a gay subtext or allegorical quality to it – part of me wants to go out there and make fun thrillers. But at the same time right now I can only take from what I know and from my own experiences and try to put that in there somewhere. I want to take my point of view but not my life. I don't want to take my own personal story. I think I've lived a boring life. I'd never want to see that on screen.

**I'm sure that's not true. You used to be Warren Beatty's personal assistant. That's not boring is it?!**  
OK. *[Laughs]* What I did with my life wasn't boring!

So it's an interesting thing for me and I think it took me a while before I made my first feature to really sort of grasp that and to realise that I really do want to make a film like this that can be both universal and gay related. I think that I would like to see queer cinema as a whole going in that direction - making films that can be equally relatable to any gender preference. There will always be room for very specific films and I hope they'll always be there and I would love to make one at some point. Right now I'm definitely interested in how you can draw people in unexpectedly. I'm trying to do that with my new project as well.

**Is that an adaptation of one of David Sedaris' short stories 'C.O.G.'? Can you tell me about that?**

It's about a time he spent in his late 20s at an apple orchard in Oregon. It's a little bit of a fable and relates to his character meeting lots of different characters and how they relate to him. His religious point of view and also how that is connected to his sexual point of view. It's a dream project and a great honour for David to trust me, so I hope I can do it justice.



**Did you or Brian ring any phone sex chat lines in the name of research?**

I didn't and I don't believe Brian did. We rehearsed a lot. We went through every line of dialogue in the script, except we would always get to the scene and there would be this uncomfortability and we'd be like, "Let's come back to it, let's come back to it", and we wouldn't pick that up until the day of shooting and he was like, "I've got it covered. I think I know how to do the scene." So I said, "OK. If you have any troubles just ask me", but you know what, it's a 10 and a half minute take and he got it right the very first time. He just knew every beat and he figured out what was going to be funny, erotic and sincere.

**So he did his own research then. Say no more.**

*[Laughs]* He said to me that he's been practising his whole life for this role.

**There's no nudity or violence in your film and I'm thinking it must be one of the only films in history to get an NC-17 rating for its sexual dialogue alone.**

It's actually for the one scene of explicit sexual language.

**So the MPAA (the US film censors) told you why they rated it NC-17? I didn't think they did.**

I think more recently when they issue the certificates or whatever they'll include a sentence or two for what it's for. I did some research and I'm not 100 percent sure but I believe we are the only film to get an NC-17 rating based solely on language.

**"I do want to create universal films and not niche films. I want to make movies that everyone can find something about themselves in."**

**Did you expect to get an NC-17 rating and did you have any problems getting it into cinemas or getting adverts placed?**

No because we did our own theatrical release and we were always going to play it through the art house circuit. And technically if you get a rating you aren't happy with you can release the film unrated.

Technically the film is unrated in the United States, which didn't bother our DVD distributors. They're a specialty distributor and handle a lot of films with material like this and I was actually glad that no one raised an issue.

One thing I'm glad I had the foresight to do was to shoot that scene in one take, so there's no way it could be censored if we'd sold it to a bigger company. If they'd wanted to change it there would have been no way we could have done anything about it. I did that on purpose because it's the most important scene in the film.

Because of the MPAA's history, and I'm cautious in saying this, but having read a lot about them and having done a lot of research about them, they do have a stronger history of judging gay material. I can't help but feel that the reveal of the film played something of a part because ultimately it's not just a scene of explicit language, in the end it's a scene of homoerotic explicit language.

**Your film has won a number of awards and had very positive reviews. What's one of the nicest things you've read about it? And what's one of the worst?**

Winning the Spirit Award was definitely a highlight for me, something I've always dreamed of. Awards aren't that important to me - it's more about the attention it brings to the movie.

When we first played I'd never had a short film or a feature film out and I'd never had written reviews and I remember our publicist handing me our first review from a website I read frequently called Cinematical and he said something very nice about it. I think the quote was something like, "Filmmakers don't always make something this good on their 10th try" and I was really honoured by that but really pressured too.

I try to feel encouraged by both the bad and good reviews because I know I have room to grow. I try not to say better, but to become more complex I hope. I hope the next films will do that.

And the meanest things - I remember I was at a Q&A at the theatre and I was waiting outside and someone said, "God. I can't believe I wasted my money. I wish I could those two hours of my life back". And I thought, "Really? Those two hours? Of all the movies you've seen?" I mean, I'm proud of my film and I know I've seen worse and those are the two hours you want to get back?!

Once it's out to the masses, especially on digital watch where people can pull it up and watch it whenever you want people have said some really hateful things about there being a gay ending and that kind of stuff makes me really angry. It just fuels me, it doesn't stop me. It just makes me want to make more.



**I guess that sort of criticism is always going to happen because there will always be homophobia and any homophobes who watch it are going to feel particularly cheated aren't they?**

Yes. That was my hope that people would go in, they'd get drawn into it, they thought it was a heterosexual love story and then be blindsided with this isn't what I thought it was but it's still the same story and that was really important to me because I do want to create universal films and not niche films. I want to make movies that everyone can find something about themselves in.

**This is your first feature film. Is there anything you wish you'd known before you started making it?**

I probably could write a book about that. Having the responsibility of the budget on my shoulders I tried to treat it with a lot of humility and I tried to work with a lot of people who knew a lot more than me and learn from them. I still have so much to learn and every day was like that. But at the same time we met every production day, we came under budget and I'm proud of those things. But I definitely learned a lot about working with actors and having patience and communicating and respecting them and that's something I'm excited to take with me to the next film. I'm so eager to get the next thing in front of camera.

**What were you doing before you became a director?**

I moved to LA after I graduated from film school in Miami. I worked as a runner for a production company and then I worked for Warren for a year. Then I was an editor of promotional videos to make a living while I got this film made, which took me four years. So that's been pretty much my time in Los Angeles.

**Who would you list as your main influences?**

On *Easier With Practice* it was definitely Wong-Kar Wai. *In the Mood For Love* is one of my favourites. Overall, I've always loved Hitchcock. He's what got me into film. The film is planned, the shots are deliberate, there's an intention to every cut, every angle, the mise en scene is so important.

**And, finally, has Warren Beatty seen your film?**

I don't believe he has. I've been so busy but I've been meaning to show up on his door and hand him a copy of it but I haven't had a chance to do that yet. He knows I've made it. We've talked on the phone a few times. I hope he likes it because he's certainly someone I have the utmost admiration for and he's made some of my favourite films of all time.

**Plus his wife Annette Bening has just made *The Kids Are All Right*, which is a gay film that has a universal feel.**

My secret hope is that at some point in my life I can reach the point where I would be able to cast her. She's one of my favourite actresses, I mean forever. She's always been one of my favourites and I would pretty much do everything next to killing to get to work with her.

**It would be great if you could get them together...**

I can only dream of that.

## [Read Our Review Of \*Easier With Practice\* »](#)

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***Easier With Practice* opens in UK cinemas on 3 December 2011.**



Author: Rachael Scott

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