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## Entertainment : Film & TV : Interviews

### Lynn Shelton

07 Dec 2009

**Lynn Shelton's obvious delight in making *Humpday* is infectious. Not that I needed any encouragement to appreciate what she's done with her 'bromance extreme'. *Humpday* is a collaborative work between Shelton and the film's stars Mark Duplass and Joshua Leonard where the two best friends decide to have sex with each other for a porn movie.**

Livelier than the average mumblecore movie, of which Duplass, who directed *The Puffy Chair*, is arguably the king, there was no formal script and the actors didn't know whether they had to prepare themselves for a sex scene or not. This makes for a new level of will they/won't they? storytelling.

Straights will go into the cinema thinking there's no convincing way two guys could get to the point they very convincingly get to in *Humpday*. What Shelton has been so clever in achieving is not simply a film about the prospect of two straight men having sex with each other and how that might make them behave pre-, during and post the act, but using that idea to look at the fear of growing up. *Humpday* is about accepting your youth has given up the fight to responsibility.

Rachael Scott met with Lynn Shelton to talk about her micro-budget success and get the low down on how she managed to pull off such an unlikely tale.

#### **Congratulations on *Humpday*. Can you talk a little bit about how you got the idea for the movie?**

*Humpday* came together because I wanted to work with Mark Duplass. It's my third feature and I made my first feature film in a really traditional way where I wrote the script and thought of characters that I had and so on.

I wanted to try something more organic and collaborative on my second feature. Mostly I was in search of a way to pull naturalism out of the performances and the writing, too. I can write, but I don't like to. And I'm not the type of writer who can sit down and create this beautiful drum tight that has perfect naturalistic dialogue. My standard for naturalism is really high. I really want to be able to believe everything that's coming out of everyone's mouths.

I decided to try casting around the people I wanted to work with and inviting all of the actors in to the process early enough so they could develop their own characters or be heavily involved in that way. Once I knew who the characters were I could start writing the script. So I was doing it upside down a little bit.

I was quite focused on Mark Duplass who plays Ben in the movie. I met him when he came to Seattle to act in another feature film and I volunteered to be the set photographer so I could meet him. I really wanted to meet him. He's of course half of the Duplass brothers and we really hit it off as filmmakers.

One of the conversations that we had really stuck with me. It was this idea of taking characters and putting them out of their comfort zone. Putting them into a situation that's unusual and seeing what happens. If we really know who those characters are you should be able to set them in there like lab rats in a maze and just see how it plays out.

That's really what it was. I was trying to think of different characters that Mark could play, different scenarios to put him in and for some reason so far I haven't been drawn to romantic comedies because it just seems you always know how it's going to end up. So I tend not to think about films in those terms, so I guess that keeps drawing me back to friendship. There have been a lot of buddy movies but I still think there's a lot of territory to explore there.

I just started putting a different scenario with different people and really how much more uncomfortable could you make a couple of straight guys? That precise idea came about when another friend came to visit me and went to Hump! (Seattle's amateur porn festival). He had a really interesting reaction to the films and we had a lot of conversations, especially about the gay porn that he'd seen. He was straight and he'd never seen gay porn before. We just talked about it a lot and that was really what got me thinking that the relationship between straight men and gayness is a particular relationship. The average straight guy has a particular attachment to their sexual identity.

**"It seems that a lot of straight guys I know have this deep terror that they might secretly be gay, that they might not even know themselves, which just blows my mind because I just can't relate to that at all."**

**What are your theories on the average straight man's ideas about gayness, if they're not homophobic?**  
It's certainly not cool to be homophobic these days, thank God. I think your average run of the mill straight guy is trying to be progressive and they may genuinely be good friends with gay people but they still have this particular anxiety.

It seems that a lot of straight guys I know have this deep terror that they might secretly be gay, that they might not even know themselves, which just blows my mind because I just can't relate to that at all. I mean, having gone through a long period of time in my early adulthood when I really wanted to be a lesbian and it's only recently occurred to me that there are a lot of straight guys who are terrified they might be gay which I think is hysterically funny. They certainly seem attached to the idea that, even if the whole world is gay, everybody must know that they are straight.

I feel like this film really is of its time. I don't think it could have been made even five or six years ago. I don't



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know if people would have been ready for it. Certainly in Seattle and a lot of large cities there's a very strong sub-culture of alternative sexualities, polyamory, which is the new terminology for an open relationship, and BDSM and kinky sex, so there's this openness and playfulness and, you know, porn festivals. When I was growing up in the 80s, all feminism was completely anti-pornography. It was all about porn being evil and debasing women.

**So it's not just men who are into these new sexual alternatives?**

Oh no. It's a whole cultural shift. It's a playfulness with sexual identity and sexual boundaries. It leaves the average low-grade homophobic straight guy, not because they hate gay people, but they themselves are anxious about their own relationship to homosexuality in this really awkward and interesting position. One of the main reasons the guys in the film come up with this idea is to prove they're not homophobic and they are completely adventurous.

**Things have changed a lot because of *Brokeback Mountain*. We have 'bromance' movies now, which are slightly more than buddy movies, but don't go as far as *Brokeback Mountain*. What do you think about that new genre?**

I've always loved buddy movies. I just watched *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* again recently, which is an absolute classic. They're obviously completely in love with each other, not sexually, but there is this complete bond. I think that film is brilliant.

So there's a long history of bromances and I think they're wonderful. I'm a huge fan of Judd Apatow. I don't usually go and see the genre of crass comedies, but I think there's a certain intelligence and humanity he brought to that genre.



***Humpday* is very believable. You bought the story every step of the way especially when you find out the actors (Mark Duplass and Joshua Leonard) hadn't decided whether they would have sex or not in the film before they started shooting. Basically if they liked the idea of doing it at the time then they would, which is quite incredible. You're never sure which way it will go which makes the film pretty exciting to watch.**

That was Mark's original idea. He thought that not only would it be a good idea because it would add this extra tension and dynamic quality to the scene, but to the rest of the film as well because if we knew how it was going to end there might always be this sense of aiming for a pre-determined destination. We really thought it would be great if it was open-ended in every way.

**Can you talk me through the build up to the scene in the motel room and how you went about shooting it?**

Again in the search for total authenticity and honesty, I really felt the film was going to fail if at any point the audience felt that something was forced or contrived. So we were on high alert for any false notes.

The months leading up to the shoot were mostly spent trying to create this texture of reality into the character's lives and relationships, so there was a lot of back story. We had to get together to figure out exactly what these people meant to each other and all the different scenes that go into a complicated human relationship.

Filming the entire thing in order really helped, too, because we only had ten days, which was a very intense period and it was a very small, very intimate little crew, so we checked into the hotel room at seven at night and we knew we were going to be there overnight. Basically, it was me and my director of photography holding a camera each, with the sound recordist and the two actors locked in for 12 hours and not emerging until we were done.

We really left whatever preconceptions of what we thought might or might not happen at the door. We all had different ideas and when we walked in I told them (Mark and Joshua) that I needed them to live out the scene as Ben and Andrew. They both had really strong motivations for going through with it as well as the genuine terror as characters. I think they were both really feeling that. It was the most exciting thing because this scene was the most purely improvised part of the film.

I don't like to rehearse, because sometimes lightning strikes the first time and you can never capture that again. If you don't get that on film, it's really sad. There's this one half hour take, which was just gold. It was so hard not to be shaking with laughter and joy because of what I was capturing. It was the first kiss that they did, the *Pretty Woman* line, the swimming pool scenario, and that was the shot where I panned down to their bellies. All of that was in one take. When we tried to do it again we could never capture everything, it was all in that first take.

**"So many people are out now which makes me so endlessly happy. Obviously homophobia still exists...but it just seems that there's never been a better time to be gay or bisexual."**

***Humpday* is being marketed as two straight friends who consider having sex with each other, but there's a lot more to the story than that, isn't there?**

Indeed. And what I like to do with these films is find a scenario I have a feeling is going to provide a lot of interesting territory to explore and this provided way more than I could ever have imagined.

I think the film is as much about marriage as it is about friendship. It's about sexual identity, the boundaries of sexuality and sexual politics. It's also, as much as anything else, about one's relationship to self. The idea we have of who we are doesn't always jive with who we've turned out to be and how difficult and jarring that distance can be.

Seeing an old friend, especially one you were very close to before you were fully formed, when life was just this endless universe of possibilities and you knew each other then and you see each other ten years later, I don't know how you could avoid having an identity crisis. You see in their whole face who you were then and who they were and who you were together. It's just the most intense experience and I think people can relate to that as well. So I'm hoping there are a number of experiences people can relate to in the film in a very personal way.

**It's not really a 'gay' movie at all.**

It's actually the opposite of a gay movie. It's really about the extremities of straightness, but I do think it's gay friendly and I worked very hard to make that the case. I think the most together, normalised people in the film are the gay ones, although they don't play huge roles.

**How has it been received by gay audiences and the gay press so far?**

I don't want to give away the ending in your article but there does seem to be a quadrant within the gay population, especially amongst the men, who were disappointed by the ending. On the other hand, I think the authenticity of how it's so difficult for Ben and Andrew is totally appreciated. I had a friend who said he totally recognised in the scene where Ben and Andrew kiss and he said he thought of the first time he tried to kiss a girl and it was just not happening.

I was very nervous about an older gentleman who is the father of a friend of mine seeing it. He was really on the fence about gay rights and *Humpday* changed his mind about Proposition 8 and convinced him that gay people deserve the same civil rights as everybody else because you can't just pick up and decide that you want to be gay. That issue of choice really helped convince him.

**Do you think that *Humpday* could do for gay/straight movie relationships what *Slumdog Millionaire* did for Hollywood/Bollywood?**

I wish that were the case. [Laughs]. If it did, I would be a very happy woman.

***Humpday* is like a great meshing of gay and straight, but Hollywood still has this great fear of gay characters and films with a strong gay content.**

I do have a feeling there's going to be a lot of other films like this. It's such fun territory to play with, the relationship between straight and gay worlds. So many people are out now which makes me so endlessly happy.

Obviously homophobia still exists and there's still violence against gay people, and a lot of hatred out there, but it just seems that there's never been a better time to be gay or bisexual. I think little by little the cultural landscape has been reflecting that and incorporating more than the token gay character.

I finally got around to seeing *Milk* and it just blew my mind because it was the first time I'd ever seen an effeminate character who wasn't ineffectual. He was the opposite of that, he was completely powerful.

**Do you think women are more accepting of their sexuality and more prepared to be sexually fluid and experiment than men?**

What I've read through a column called Savage Love is that there have been studies done showing that women physiologically tend to be more fluid. So even if you identify as straight or gay, there tends to be a little more fluidity in women's sexual boundaries than men.

Certainly, bisexual men exist, but on the spectrum between gay and straight, in general men tend to be more polarised. If you're gay, you're pretty much gay, and if you're straight, you're pretty much straight. It's interesting these studies were done on this physiological/biological level. It's just endlessly fascinating to me.

People have asked me what would the film have been like if I'd made it with two women and I don't think it would have been very interesting. First of all, there's this sort of male testosterone dripping one-upmanship, which really gets them into this situation because they dare each other. If women had done it, that wouldn't have been the dare. If they'd wanted to experiment in that way they probably just would have done it.

If you think about the cultural landscape, it's almost cliché for young straight girls to make out at clubs. I can't imagine anytime in the near future where it's going to be cool for straight guys to do the same thing. So the culture says it's OK for straight women to play around and, in fact, they're encouraged to - it's considered sexy. It's quite the opposite for straight guys. It's maybe both that women have more of an ability to do but it's also culturally sanctioned.

**You play a bisexual artist in the film. What's it like playing yourself?**

*Humpday* is as purely independent as you can get. I looked at the resources I had at my disposal and made sure I had enough money to feed people, but basically picked up a camera and started making a movie and didn't have to wait for anyone else's permission. There are a bunch of filmmakers who are doing that and they tend to all be very character based small stories.

Joe Swanberg, who's not that well known across the ocean, also uses improvisation and is really collaborative and organic in his process. He likes to cast other filmmakers, or he did in his earlier films, anyway. So he had cast me in a couple of roles in a web series he did and a film, I had a really good time working in that way and it gave me first hand experience with that kind of work - being able to watch him on set and how he directed. He often appears in his own work as well, which gave me some confidence that I could do it.

The way I like to direct is be on my feet and almost improvise the way the actors are able to. It's a different skillset I don't know how to explain, but it's really about being in tune, adjusting to what's happening and just being in the moment. It was difficult to do that when I was acting in the scene because, as an actor, your brain needs to be in a different place. You can't have a bird's eye view of what's going on. I found it difficult to juggle the two. I had to really pre-visualise how the scene was going to play out and communicate that to the camera people.

**Would you think twice about doing it again?**

Yeah. I love acting and hope to be able to continue doing that, but it will only be in other people's work.

**Tell me about the real Humpfest.**

I actually just made a film for it with Dan Savage. He has a syndicated sex advice column called Savage Love. He's based in Seattle and he's the editor in chief at this alternative weekly called The Stranger. He's also the co-founder of Hump! I think it's in its fifth or sixth year and he called me out on his blog: 'Lynn Shelton show Hump! some love. Without Hump! there'd be no *Humpday*!'

So he wanted me to make a film and I thought, 'I don't know if I want to make a porn'. Half the films aren't hardcore - they're sock puppet sex. You know, like cheeky, naughty films. And occasionally there's hardcore porn, but it's quite a combination.

I shouldn't be telling you all this, but I'm so excited, though. It's just a little five-minute film I threw together before I left. I shot it in the morning and edited it in the evening. My husband is hand delivering it today.

**Is there one moment in the film that says, "This is brilliant filmmaking even if I do say so myself?"**

Oh my God. [Laughs]. That's a great question. I have a lot of favourite moments. The thing I love about working so collaboratively is that I feel like I can fully enjoy watching my film and not be full of myself. It's really a true celebration. I feel just grateful to everybody I got to collaborate with and what everybody brought to the project. The brilliance I really feel in my filmmaking is how smart I was to bring these great people together!

The places I feel that are most kind of me - there's this one montage of static shots in the night when the two of them are confessing to each other in the dark and then there's this transition to Ben and Anna having a conversation on the couch in the morning. We see scenes from their domestic life and I wanted to convey in a cinematic way the life they've built together and how fragile it is.

If there's a movie I could have made in the whole world I always think of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. I'm so looking forward to the time when I can make a film that has room for purely cinematic language. There's so much talking in *Humpday*, so I think I really treasure those little breaks that you get in it.

**Humpday opens in UK cinemas on 18 December 2009.**

Author: Rachael Scott

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