

20

DUPLASS BROTHERS

MARK AND JAY, THE SIBLINGS WHO ARE EVERYWHERE (TRANSPARENT, TOGETHERNESS, THE LEAGUE) AND DO EVERYTHING (ACT, WRITE, DIRECT), DISCUSS THEIR INTENSE RELATIONSHIP, TELL WHY THEY CRY A LOT AND EXPLAIN HOW TO DIRECT YOUR BROTHER IN A SEX SCENE

BY STEPHEN REBELLO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY HERRING & HERRING

Q1

PLAYBOY: Some brothers can barely stand being in the same room, yet since the early 2000s you two have co-written and co-directed indie movies such as *The Puffy Chair* and *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*; co-produced 20-odd flicks including *The Skeleton Twins* and *The Overnight*; and co-created (with Steve Zissis), co-written and co-directed the HBO series *Togetherness*, which is about to launch its second season. Plus, on the side, you're overseeing a seven-movie Netflix deal, and Mark is a regular actor on both *Togetherness* and *The League* and Jay appears on *Transparent*. If you were to write and direct a movie about what your relationship is *really* like, would skeletons come rattling out of the closet?

MARK: That movie would be rooted in our childhood and akin to *Life Is Beautiful*—a couple of kids living in the middle of the Holocaust but having this kind of contained, private, safe experience. We had an incredibly uncultivated free-for-all youth in Metairie, a small suburb outside New Orleans. Our dad was a civil trial attorney who could dissect anything, and our mother—this creative bird flying through the sky—stayed home to take care of us. It was wide streets with 1970s-built houses up against the levee and the water—no summer camp, organized sports or play dates, just running in the streets with friends. It was rolling out of school at 2:45 and putting on that unabashedly adult, feelings-based and sex-comedy HBO shit we loved, like *Sophie's Choice*, *Gandhi*, *Ordinary People*, *Tootsie* and

Woody Allen movies, while our friends got stuck on *Ghostbusters* and *Star Wars*.

Q2

PLAYBOY: Sounds idyllic considering the movies you make, but how would that Duplass brothers biopic end?

MARK: Four miles away in New Orleans, where it was dangerous and exciting—but just like a smell, a feeling, as opposed to something real for us. We'd end our movie when Jay was 19 and I was 15 and we'd gone to a strip club about a mile from our house. Tiffany the dancer came out, there was a blast of smoke behind her, and this older gentleman turned to me, grabbed my arm and said, "Where there's smoke, there's fire." We knew we'd crossed over.

Q3

PLAYBOY: When women entered your lives, with or without blasts of smoke, did things between you shift or become competitive?

MARK: No, because there's an almost four-year age gap between us. What was always difficult was finding room for girls inside our almost twin-like relationship. We could always be polite and friendly, socially and emotionally, but with women it was always like, "How do we find the space for this?" Over the years it was hard for our girlfriends to be close to each other. That was a hard one to get right. We were driven. We're both married now with kids. We finally had to break up in some way to allow marriage and children to come in.

Q4

PLAYBOY: Was that breakup a "conscious uncoupling," as Gwyneth Paltrow called her divorce?

JAY: Or a semiconscious one. It's a sine-cosine wave that continues to morph and change throughout the years. We're faithful husbands; we're good dads. But then Mark and I will spend three intense months making *Togetherness* and this rhythm will start to come back. After the show is finished, I'll go to Austin with my family for a month. It's hard enough to have one committed relationship. With us, it's like being polygamous.

Q5

PLAYBOY: Growing up, did you two give your parents a lot of grief?

MARK: It was very hard to piss our parents off. When we were really young, we would annoy them daily on a surface level with bullshit kid stuff, like just being assholes in the back of our station wagon. Our dad would get to the point where he'd say, "I'm putting a dollar on the dashboard for every hour you guys are quiet, and you can keep the dollar." These were our conflicts. We were raised with a simple and clear message, which was "You are amazing and you can do anything."

Q6

PLAYBOY: Do you tell your own kids the same thing now?

MARK: We live in Los Angeles, where time is very scheduled and you can't let kids roam. We (continued on page 132)





DUPLASS BROTHERS

Continued from page 84

try to put musical instruments around the house and not talk about them other than to say, “Hey, see this piano?” That way, maybe you don’t get back from them, “Yeah, fuck this piano.”

Q7

PLAYBOY: Post-high school, you both studied filmmaking at the University of Texas at Austin and then ended up in New York. Did you cut loose in the big city?

JAY: In college, it would be eight o’clock on a Friday night and people would ask, “You want to go drinking or whatever?” And we’d just be working with our video camera and our guitars, trying to figure something out. We always had this feeling, as artists, how the fuck can you go out drinking when all the cards are stacked against you? You should be doing something every second, every minute for your art. We had this fear of failing the vision our parents tried

to cultivate in us in a loving, positive way, which was—and still is—that we should be doing something that makes us successful.

Q8

PLAYBOY: You scraped together enough money in 2005 to make the indie comedy *The Puffy Chair*, which set you on your path. Is it true you secretly wanted to be like the Coen brothers, making noise with your equivalents of *Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona*?

JAY: When we started out, we were more like, “Oh God, if we could just get one movie into Sundance, then we could go and be lawyers.” Literally, *lawyers*. But yeah, when we were in film school in Texas, everyone wanted to be the Coen brothers. Their approach is a forced march of their brilliance. Ours is, How can we stack the cards in our favor so we find something great?

Q9

PLAYBOY: Once you’d found your groove with funky, improvisational comedies like *Baghead* and *Cyrus*, how soon was it before the big studios tried to rope you in?

MARK: We’ve been approached many times about directing bigger movies. About two years ago there was a very serious offer on the table for us to do a big superhero franchise. The studio thought it could have the same plot points and trailer moments and we would just inject it with a sense of organic relationships. That’s when we realized it would be a lost cause for us. When you do a big movie, the studio owns you for two years. You owe them that. We like to do bedtime with our kids.

Q10

PLAYBOY: Co-directing as you do, does it ever get weird when, say, Jay directs a sex scene for *Togetherness* between Mark and his screen wife (played by Melanie Lynskey), both of them half-naked, with spanking, vibrators or clothespins on nipples?

MARK: There’s more of that stuff this season, but by the time we’re wedded to doing, say, an uncomfortable sex scene, it has been beaten to death because we’ve spent a lot of time discussing plot, level of verisimilitude, comedy, pathos. I just show up on the set ready to get naked and do things. If anything, Jay should be more aware that there are other naked people in the room. Last season, when Melanie and I had a scene in a hotel room, I wanted Jay to be our main cameraman. At a certain point, he was grabbing my hand, moving it around, saying, “Put your hand back on Melanie’s boob.” Afterward, Melanie was giggling, “You realize you told your brother to put his hand on my boob?” To us, that was completely normal.

Q11

PLAYBOY: *The Overnight*, which you produced, is a comedy that dabbles in mate swapping and bisexuality. *Tangerine*, shot on an iPhone, is a kind of screwball comedy about transgender sex workers. When you’re working, which of you is likely to pump the brakes and say, “Too much.”

JAY: On the *Transparent* set, the bathrooms are mostly gender-neutral. If you’re peeing and a woman comes in, it’s just the way it is. I can’t even tell who’s transgender half the time, partially because of their effectiveness and partially because my brain has started to let go of those things. I live in one of the most gender-fluid, evolved—if not the most progressive—scenarios on earth right now. We’d never have a conversation about what’s too much.

Q12

PLAYBOY: *Transparent*, a dark comedy about three self-obsessed adult children and their father, who is transitioning from male to female, is a hot-button TV show, but it’s also very funny. Is it tough to not crack up at some of the lines and performances?

JAY: It’s the opposite problem. Mark and I are big criers. We cry all the fucking time. I have to stop myself from crying when I work on *Transparent*. The show is at the forefront of a civil rights movement. We’ll be setting up a scene and I’ll be like, “Oh my God, here it comes. Maybe I shouldn’t cry.” Mark and I just feel all the things. We’re in touch with our emotions. Personally, I enjoy it. I find it cathartic.

Q13

PLAYBOY: Has a review or tweet ever made you cry?

JAY: I don’t know how we got there, but I don’t care about that stuff anymore. People on Twitter seem to like what we do. Our friends like it. We would love to win trophies and shit like that, but if Mark and I make each other happy with what we come up with, that’s it.

Q14

PLAYBOY: Now that you’re successful, how do you kick back and enjoy it?

JAY: The hardest thing for us right now is turning it off, man. I’m over 40 and still in this manic state of trying to achieve and not allowing myself to rest. I feel exactly like Mark when he says, “I cannot rest, because I’ve put everything in danger to do this unusual thing.” We’re more successful than we ever thought we’d be, but we’re still driven by desperation and fear.

Q15

PLAYBOY: Have you tried the usual antidotes—meditation, yoga, running, stupid spending, travel, exotic diets?

MARK: Jay is really into meditation and trying to be enlightened and stuff. At the same time, we’re just generally a little unsettled in the world. We have a couple of friends who were truly born with the bliss gene. We didn’t get that, and we’re both jealous of it. But bliss hurts the work. You have to be fucking hungry. You’ve got to want stuff.

Q16

PLAYBOY: In much of your acting, as well as in projects you direct and produce, the vibe given off is that you’re relatable and accessible, though somehow, others think of you and your work as funky, Eastside Los Angeles hipster. What range of responses do you get in public?

JAY: We are the kings of bourgeois. Our shit is so bourgeois. It’s about having children,

trying to do your job and being happy. We are bougie as fuck, man. I mean, have people seen the sneakers on *Togetherness*? Nothing hip there. Part of what has drawn people to us is that they look at us and say, “These are just two regular, mildly good-looking, semi-intelligent guys from the suburbs.” As movie-makers, I think early on we gave off this erroneous vibe of “Just pick up your camera and do your thing, man, and everything will be okay.” Lots of people wanted to be like us and work with us, but once we sat with them and they got two-feet deep into what it actually takes, 98 percent of them bailed immediately.

Q17

PLAYBOY: You’ve made movies with Jonah Hill, Jason Segel, Ed Helms and Susan Sarandon. Have any actors bailed on you?

MARK: We want to work with people like Richard Jenkins, Jeff Daniels and Meryl Streep, but we’re a little nervous about it. If it works, it would be explosive. But would they surrender to the thing we do without thinking we’re idiots? Would they suffer the foolery of not knowing what’s going to happen and be able to sit in chaos?

Q18

PLAYBOY: When was the last time you found an actor in synch with that thing you do?

MARK: Amanda Peet, whom we work with on *Togetherness*, is so ridiculously intelligent, it’s really kind of terrifying. There is an explosive, confident, dangerous core to her character that comes from Amanda Peet

that no one else could give us. She allows herself to laugh, spaz out and then just get quiet and terrifyingly close to either crying or destroying another human being. Melanie Lynskey is quiet, plays the subtleties and really thinks about the character. We like that breadth of humanity. We like that humans are unpredictable and show things you wouldn’t expect.

Q19

PLAYBOY: Who do you want to be now that you’ve grown up?

MARK: We’ve produced probably 25 movies over the past 10 years. We like to inspire. Amy Poehler is a huge hero of mine for the way she’s cultivated other people’s work with *Difficult People* and *Broad City*. We like being part of raising up a certain type of person, a talent. We joke that we have a Schindler complex of trying to save people from the artistic struggle that we went through.

Q20

PLAYBOY: If it all went south tomorrow, what would you do?

JAY: The weird part is that we’re getting paid to do all this stuff and no one can take it away from us. We know how to really cheaply make and produce movies that make money even if they stink so that everyone can live and fight another day. That’s what we’re meant to do.

