

TORONTO

A scene from Matt Aselton's "Gigantic." Photo courtesy of the Toronto International Film Festival.

TORONTO '08 CRITICS NOTEBOOK | "Gigantic" Breaks Out; "Pedro" Does Justice To Activist; Auds Dig "Every Little Step"

by Steve Ramos (September 9, 2008)

Nobody in the Toronto International Film Festival audience at the Monday evening premiere of "Gigantic," a lovely, funny, unabashedly odd romance from first-time feature filmmaker Matt Aselton, mentioned the name Wes Anderson in the post-screening question-and-answer sessions. But they would have been correct to reference the director of critical hits "The Darjeeling Limited," "The Royal Tenenbaums" and "Rushmore" and I imagine that Aselton would have relished the comparison.

A standout cast featuring up-and-comers Paul Dano and Zooey Deschanel as the film's shy lovers and veteran actors John Goodman, Edward Asner and Jane Alexander as their eccentric parents, together with a vibrant New York City backdrop provide Aselton a strong template for a likable youth romance with strong box office potential. The wonderful surprise is

that Aselton, helped by co-writer Adam Nagata, does so much more with the audience friendly formula. "Gigantic," while pretty to watch, engaging from start to finish and funny in all the right places, offers audiences a surreal twist in the form of a mystery character stalking its romantic lead. It's an odd creative choice for Aselton, one that intentionally upends his audience-friendly movie. Yet, it works brilliantly, distinguishing "Gigantic" from other films in the genre and shows Aselton to be a filmmaker with a bright future.

Brooklyn mattress salesman Brian (Dano) falls fast for Hariette (Deschanel) when she comes to his store to buy a bed for wealthy father (John Goodman). Their love affair, while tentative, moves quickly. But the childlike Hariette runs away upon news that Brian intends to become a single dad by adopting a Chinese baby.

Dano, best known for his role as a young preacher in "There Will Be Blood," offers "Gigantic" a dead-on lead performance, equal parts charming and timid, and huge commercial value to the film's box office potential. Deschanel, while failing to break new acting ground as Happy, plays the type of quirky role audiences have come to expect from her. She connects sweetly with Dano and gives the film heart.

For a first-time filmmaker like Aselton, someone with zero name recognition, it's the greatest gift he could hope for from his young leads.

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