

Commentary: 'Gigantic' is big step forward for first-time director

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"Gigantic" genre: Most films are described easily enough in terms of their genre, but that's really not the case with "Gigantic."

A first film from commercials director Matt Aselton, the R-rated "Gigantic" is about families and family relationships, but it isn't what you'd call a family film. It's got a surreal love story, but it's not your typical romantic comedy. And while there are laughs, it's not exactly what we have in mind when we think of comedies. Aselton probably says it best when he defines it as a "mostly comedy," explaining that focusing too much on getting laughs would have meant losing his film's emotional core.

Opening Friday in Los Angeles via First Independent Pictures, "Gigantic" is directed by Matt Aselton (pictured) and co-written by Adam Nagata and Aselton. It was produced by Mindy Goldberg, founder and president of Epoch Films, which began producing features in 2007 with "Junebug," and Christine Vachon, who's partnered with Pamela Koffler in Killer Films, whose many features include "Boys Don't Cry" and "Far From Heaven."

"Gigantic," which is widening its release in the coming weeks to 25 or 30 key cities, was executive produced by Paul Dano, Scott Ferguson, Jerry Solomon, Jeff Preiss and John Wells. Starring are Paul Dano, Zooey Deschanel, Ed Asner, Jane Alexander and John Goodman.

In "Gigantic" Dano plays Brian, a salesman in a high-end mattress store who meets Harriet (Deschanel) when she comes in to complete the paperwork to buy a \$14,000 bed that her obnoxiously wealthy father (Goodman) tried out and liked earlier that day. Their relationship develops after Harriet falls dead asleep for two and a half hours on the very mattress that Brian's charging to her dad's credit card. Brian's got a crazy family on his side, too. He's the late-in-life child of elderly parents (Asner and Alexander) and in the shadow of his brothers -- a shady oilman and a surgeon. Just to complicate things more -- Brian's passion in life for years has been trying to adopt a baby from China, which is proving tough to do because he's 28 and single. Oh, and just for good measure, there's a mysterious homeless man who's trying to kill him.

After enjoying an early look at the quirky "Gigantic," I was glad to be able to focus with Aselton on how he got to take his big step forward to direct his first feature. When we spoke he'd just arrived in New York for the film's April 3 premiere and was in great spirits with "Gigantic" having just won the Grand Jury Prize for Narrative Feature at the AFI Dallas International Film Festival.

Getting the project going, he said, was relatively uncomplicated. "(Nagata and I) finished writing it in 2006 and gave the (script) to Mindy Goldberg," Aselton told me. "I've been shooting television commercials for her production company for years. So she took the script to Christine Vachon at Killer and we all met and decided that we wanted to go forward."

Casting Brian, the male lead, was the first thing they needed to tackle once they were green lighted by Killer Films. "I met Paul Dano not long after that and we sat down and had a long discussion about the film and the tone," he explained. "It's a unique (story that) I think Paul was just right for. After Paul came on, the next step was making sure that the girl opposite (him) made sense. I'd never met Zooey before. We had tea in L.A. and she was great. She had a really sweet perspective on it, and I thought she got all the proper mechanics of the (character's) dysfunction.

"John Goodman was somebody that we had written the role for just because his is such a recognizable (artist's) voice. I'd never seen him play a bombastic art dealer, and we just felt that he could do it. I just pestered him for months. He was making a series of studio movies and then finally agreed to meet me. We sat down and chatted and he liked the script. Those three (actors) together sort of galvanized the project and made it real. Fortunately, Ed and Jane came on afterwards. We shot last year around this time. I spent about five months editing in a cave in Los Angeles. We premiered at Toronto (last fall), and now we're here."

Asked how he'd describe his film in just a few words, Aselton replied, "I think it's about exploring the depths of family dysfunction for many years and what that means to the modern family."

The way in which Aselton shot the movie using mostly medium-long lenses creates a sense of observing the action and eavesdropping on the characters. "It's such a personal story," he said, "with a lot of subtleties and strangeness that I felt we didn't really want to present the movie so much as observe the movie. I feel a lot of comedy gets presented that way, and we didn't want it to be just a pure comedy. We wanted to make sure that it had some emotion to it. We wanted to stay away from funny looking lenses and go for more cinematic looking things. I generally think that backing the camera up and being on a longer lens helps that. It's just a better look for me."

Shooting took place over 24 days in New York and one day in L.A. "It was extraordinary," he said about that tight schedule. "Everybody, thank God, knew that that was the movie and we were all making the same one. We all knew that there were not going to be a lot of takes and that we had to get these characters right early on. Thankfully, I thought my actors did a beautiful job."

In preparing to direct it, Aselton did not storyboard the film. "I did as much location scouting as I possibly could," he noted. "I thought that that was really the most important thing -- finding locations I could at any moment turn the camera and find something that I liked. A storyboard is (good for) a different movie than this one, I think. It kind of locks you in to a few certain things and you've got to have it right. We needed to be a little more nimble."

Was Aselton's background in directing commercials helpful in making his first feature? "I think it was an extraordinary tool just from a camera standpoint," he answered, "because you know your camera and you know your lenses and the ones you like and you know how you like things lit. That freed me from having to worry about any of that (because it's) something that I've been doing for six or seven years. That let me focus more on performance and working with actors, which is something I loved to do but had not had the chance to do (with such top actors before). It was really, really fun for me to have that."

As for rehearsing, he said, "We rehearsed with Paul and Zooey because they're the couple and we needed to make sure that they made sense together. But the rehearsal was really just the three of us walking around New York City. They read lines a little bit, but I was anxious not to dilute the process with a ton of rehearsal because I just wanted some naturalism to it, and I think that sometimes over-rehearsing things can turn it into a movie read."

I pointed out that when I put that same question to other directors they typically either say they love to have several weeks in which to rehearse or that like Aselton they'd rather not do much of it at all so their actors can do their first approaches to the material on camera. "I guess it's just a matter of your preference," he said. "I can see the benefit in it, I suppose, but it didn't really hold much appeal for me."

As for the greatest challenges he faced in production, Aselton recalled, "It was a pretty ambitious schedule that we had to try and do all this stuff with all these locations and moving all these actors around, so there's a pragmatic challenge to that. But having really no time to breathe and come up for air and step back and look at the story and make sure that everything was tracking the way that I needed it to track was something that I missed. I wished there was more time.

"But I think that that's the lament of every single person (making a low budget independent film). I imagine you hear that all the time (talking to filmmakers for this column). The movie's never done. You just run out of time. I think that's the hardest part of making something like this and, hopefully, on the next one there's (going to be more time). And I'm not asking for tons more. It's just like if we got 20 minutes behind on this movie we were in trouble."

Another challenge Aselton faced was not having early access to some of his stars. "I met with John Goodman before the movie, but I didn't get a chance to meet with Ed Asner," he told me. "I met him the day he showed up. We got 15 minutes to talk before we jumped into it. I think on another movie, at least, it would have been a little bit more than that. And (with) Jane

Alexander, the same thing. Thankfully, they're just intuitive actors that have done a very impressive volume of work so they are pretty adept at just showing up. But that is a huge challenge, just not being able to sit with the person for a little bit and say, 'OK, this is the movie we've been making for the last two weeks. Welcome.' "

Is it at all intimidating for a first time director to suddenly be working with such well established stars? "I think so," he said. "I only have fond memories of it now. It's hard to go back to the day, but the fond memories I have are mostly just because everybody showed up and was, for the lack of a better word, very professional. I think if there were bigger egos involved or there were people who had agendas it would have been very hard. You know, John Goodman has done a lot of work and he's an impressive actor. He is as open as any young actor I've ever seen. It's just like he's searching (for his character) like anybody else and looking for somebody to be paying attention while he's working.

"I'm not necessarily sure that I was telling these people what I wanted so much as I was helping them get to what was the best thing for the character. I can't work in a way (like) 'This is the way it is and this is the only way.' I feel like you've got these great minds and great actors and you have to include them in the process. If you don't, I think you're trying to force something that doesn't belong. I know there are directors who hear it in their heads and that's only way it can be. I don't work like that. Frankly, I think it's kind of insulting (to the actors)."

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