

In The Company Of Men

A BRUTAL, BATTLE OF THE SEXES DISSECTION, NEIL LABUTE'S DEBUT HAD STUDIOS QUAKING AND VIEWERS RAGING. SO HOW DID IT GO ON TO WIN ITS DIRECTOR A PLACE IN HOLLYWOOD'S HEART?



WORDS **MATT GLASBY**

CHAD: "WOMEN: INSIDE, THEY ARE ALL THE SAME. MEAT AND GRISTLE AND HATRED. JUST SIMMERING. AND I, FOR ONE, HAVE HAD IT WITH THEIR SHIT!"

It took three words to get the ball, inexorably, rolling. Three words to triumph at Sundance with a \$25,000 debut, launching several major Hollywood careers; three words to skewer an entire gender on the sword of corporate Darwinism; three words to create an all-too-credible American Psycho, the kind you could stand next to at the urinal and never, ever know. "The original first scene started with Chad (Aaron Eckhart) saying: 'Let's hurt somebody,'" says writer and director Neil LaBute. "It's not realising that you *have* hurt somebody, it's saying let's do it. For fun."

Chad's plan is a depressingly simple one. Spurned by their girlfriends, and away from HQ on a business trip, he and his nominal boss/college buddy Howie (Matt Malloy) decide to find a woman who's "vulnerable as hell", "some corn-fed bitch who'd mess her pants if you sharpen a pencil for her", and romance — then dump — her in the name of payback. "By page 15 I wanted both of these fucking guys dead," recalls Malloy. "I thought it was dastardly, audacious, and downright mean," laughs Eckhart. "And I loved it."

In the typing pool, Chad chances upon Christine (Stacy Edwards): pretty, deaf, forgotten — the perfect prey. But it's not long before things get out of hand, at least for Christine (who falls for Chad) and Howie (who falls for Christine, then falls apart). Says Malloy: "It's like the way at a frat party, you're laughing, 'Oh, man, that's bad!' Then all of a sudden some guy's got a girl out the window by her ankles and you're like, 'Hey that's not funny anymore.' And at this point you don't know if you're the next fucking person out the window."

In business, of course, anybody could be the next one out the window, and LaBute's none-more-twisted love triangle plays out against a backdrop of cut-throat professional on-upmanship punctuated by primal beats of tribal drums, a reminder that the law of the jungle is the only one that really applies here.

"That, to me, is what this movie is about," says Malloy. "It's about corporate sociopaths, and who was willing to cut 5,000 employees to get his bonus, then go home, fuck his bride and sleep like a baby."

Combining the frat house with the feral ("She's acting like I got shit smeared on my tie!"), while proving himself more two-faced than Harvey Dent, Chad is a chilling indictment of Gordon Gekko-style business ethics, brought to preening, scheming life by the excellent Eckhart. "He's an absolute Darwinian," says the *Dark Knight* actor of this "life changer"

of a role. "Whatever situation he's in he has to play a game, he has to be winning — that's how he strokes himself, that's how he gets off — and he will destroy anybody who's not his equal." In short, he's a sociopath. "This is a man who truly feels nothing, and tries to get a sense of what things feel like by torturing others and watching it," says Edwards. Malloy is even more succinct: "Everyone's met a Chad. They're either serial killers or CEOs."

But the plan couldn't have come off without Howie's stooge, not so much the good guy as the "less bad guy", according to Malloy. "Had he any spine, had he just laughed off Chad's ludicrous, evil proposition, there would be no movie," he says. "Instead he's full of anger at having opened the door to hell then not having the courage to run faster than the devil he let out and warn people." Says LaBute: "I have some serious issues with the way Howard deals with people, particularly women. The first time you see him, he's been hit by a woman — I've never been hit by a man or a woman — then he talks about pulling the ring off his

'EVERYONE'S MET A CHAD. THEY'RE EITHER SERIAL KILLERS OR THEY'RE CEOS'

Matt Malloy

ex-girlfriend's finger. Matt did a terrific job of playing this guy who seems relatively impotent on the surface and yet is full of rage underneath."

Part martyr, part mirror through which the men reveal themselves, Christine is saved from being a plot device by Edwards' extraordinarily sympathetic performance. "Stacy Edwards makes that movie," says Malloy. "The first question asked at any film festival is, 'Is she deaf?'" Although the answer's no, Edwards spent enough time at California State University Northridge's deaf studies course to perfect Christine's faltering cadences (Chad calls it her 'Flipper' voice). Indeed, so keen was LaBute to cast the actress, he postponed the shoot to avoid her wedding. "Obviously it was well worth it," he says. "There's a strength to her that says, at the end, she may look like the perfect victim, but I don't think they were able to break her." Still, it doesn't mean that *nobody* was harmed in the making of the movie. >>





'PEOPLE WANTED TO SLAP ME. THEY HAD A VISCERAL REACTION AGAINST ME'

Aaron Eckhart

HOWIE: "EVERYTHING'S A BUSINESS, WHATEVER YOU GO INTO... WE NEED TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE SITUATION, RIGHT?"

"Two ex-students of mine had been in an automobile accident and they received like, \$20,000 from the insurance company," recalls LaBute. "So I said, 'Hey, if you're gonna put that money in the bank, why not invest it in the movie?' and I guess they, you know, fell for it." Armed with his stunning "play/screenplay/whatever", which had been kicking about for years, and this whiplash-spawned windfall, he set about casting the film, calling up Edwards, who he'd met at a Sundance writing lab, and Eckhart, a college buddy.

"We were both so far on the outside of the inner circle that we were freezing to death..." recalls Eckhart, who was down to play Howie until the original Chad went MIA. "Neil asked, 'Would you play Chad?' I said, 'Oh, I can't do that.' I was an out-of-work actor in NYC with nothing going for me and I quickly realised that I was an idiot, so I called him back and said I'd do it, and the rest, really, in terms of Hollywood, is history."

With Matt Malloy onboard providing script notes (it was his idea for it to be a business trip, the rationale being: "They'd never do this at home, they'd feel only empowered out in the hinterland..."), his own toupee, plus \$5,000 top-up money borrowed from his brother (hence his executive producer credit), *In The Company Of Men* was ready to shoot, even if the miniscule budget necessitated LaBute doing some wheeler-dealing of his own. "Everything was about, 'Do I have the money?'" he recalls. "I didn't have

the money to fly people places; I had to bring the actors in a variety of creative ways just to film them."

"My friend owns a trucking company, so I hitched a ride on a 18-wheeler across the country to get there," says Eckhart. Edwards used her frequent flyer miles. "I drove myself in and my car was the production vehicle, how we got to set," says Malloy, who rehearsed with Eckhart in the weeks preceding the shoot.

Although the leads attacked the material as they would a play – pretty appropriate seeing as Chad channels Iago, Howie evokes *Death Of A Salesman's* put-upon Willy Loman, and the plot resembles *Pygmalion* in reverse – there wasn't much room for improv. "I'm pretty open to collaboration, where the best idea wins. That's why I always come up with the best ideas, so I win more often!" laughs LaBute. "That movie," states Eckhart firmly, just for the record, "is absolutely verbatim."

In many ways it had to be – there was zero margin for error. "Well, let's see," recalls Eckhart, "we had no professionals and I can't remember whose mom was making us baloney sandwiches for lunch. You absolutely cannot do more barebones than this movie. Back then you'd use Polaroid pictures for continuity. They'd take one in the morning, then I would change and I'd say: 'You need to take another!' and they'd say, 'We can't, we're only allowed to use one shot per day.' So I dipped into my pocket and said, 'Go buy some more Polaroid film.' I must have put at least a couple of bucks in."

As is often the case with guerrilla productions, the making of the film began to mimic its plot, with LaBute and co swooping in to do to Fort Wayne, Indiana, what Chad and Howie do to Christine. "We shot it in 11 days, for \$25,000. Everyone worked for free," explains LaBute. "One reason we were so lucky was that we were the first people to shoot a motion picture in that town. In California you go anywhere and people know how much to charge for locations, whereas we got away with only paying for the airport. We weren't using people, but we got things really cheap. One of them was a building downtown, the Fort Wayne version of the Empire State, it was built by the same architect. We used the outside, the offices, the bank below, the bathroom – we used all of it because it was virtually empty, all for free. In a sense you ruin it for everyone behind you because now they know how long you're going to be there, but when you find a town nobody has shot in before, you can definitely stretch your budget dollar."

Suffused with the sickly green light of computer screens, the office locations are as blank and lonely as the characters within them, lending the film a bleak timelessness. "We tried to make something that wouldn't immediately spoil," explains LaBute. "I wanted it to look like it could be today or 35 years ago." Another aesthetic decision that added to the austerity was the long static shots through which the story plays, pitilessly, out. "I much prefer to have the camera locked



Mad men: (above) Aaron Eckhart's manipulative headfucker Chad takes in some rays with rage-filled boss Howard (Matt Malloy).

down and studying the characters," says LaBute, "to let the actors create the pace, not the editor. But it's not cheap. There's no coverage, so if the actor blows three takes five minutes into each of them, you waste tons of film."

"There was a lot of pressure," agrees Eckhart. "Had Matt and I not put in the time beforehand, it would have been impossible to make that film. I remember when Stacy and I were up the tower. The sun was falling, we had 300 feet of film – or whatever it was – and that's it. We had one chance, and that one take is the one they used in the movie." Although Malloy insists "you can still see little stumbles here and there", the only thing that still bothers the director are the three – beautiful – shots where the camera finally moves. "If I could go back, take those out and replace them with static ones I would," he rues. "I wish the whole movie was locked down in that cold, clinical trap."

CHAD: "AND IT COMES TO ME... THE TRUTH. I DO NOT GIVE A SHIT, NOT ABOUT ANYBODY."

When Chad's trap finally falls, it's not Christine who's destroyed, but Howie, something that always seems to get lost amid the film's dense layers of posturing and profanity. "The inciting incident is that Howie's dumped by his girlfriend, throws himself into his work and is rewarded for his extra effort," says Malloy. "So when they're out at this remote location he's promoted above Chad, which is shocking to Chad, who can't believe he's been outplayed. That's when he concocts the whole plan, to destabilise Howie by getting to the romantic in him."

"There's an elaborate shell game being played here and Christine is one of the shells and Howard is >>

CLOSE UP

"Show. Me. Your. Balls!"



In one of *ITCOM's* most – ahem – close-to-the-bone scenes, Chad orders a young, black intern (Jason Dixie) to show him, quite literally, what he's made of. But is it really just a frat-boy hazing? "How can you say that there isn't a sexual component?" asks Malloy. "Chad's sniffing him out, he's intrigued by issues of power, blackmail, the myth – or non-myth – of endowment." So is Chad a racist too? "Yeah, he has reeeeeeeal compassion for African Americans," laughs LaBute, "but for everyone else it's open season!" And what are we to take from Chad's strange head tilt at the end of the scene? "You know, you'll have to find out from Aaron," says LaBute, "but I'm still sort of in love with some of his looks, where there's waves passing over his face and you don't know what's going through that guy's head." Well? "It does mean something," says Eckhart mysteriously. "It could mean, maybe, that he just finished himself off..."



Female trouble: (above) Malloy with Stacy Edwards as Christine.

the ultimate victim,” says LaBute. “I think the fact that the game with Christine begins to become interesting in and of itself is just an ancillary pleasure. Whatever the outcome, Chad’s plan was to make his friend suffer.”

Why? “Howie exemplifies everything that Chad despises in business,” offers Eckhart. “He’s apologetic, he doesn’t take a stand and he’s weak, and in the animal kingdom the weak don’t survive, they’re the ones the hyenas get.”

All of which makes the accusations of sexism levelled at LaBute seem even more misplaced. “I find it really surprising when people say it’s a misogynistic film,” says the director. “Chad lies to his girlfriend [who, in the final, shattering reveal, has been waiting for him at home all along], the audience, his colleagues. I always found him to be an even-handed manipulator.” Not that this seems to sway some of the film’s more vocal – and physical – detractors. “Aaron was on the phone, walking in New York, and a woman came up and said, ‘I hate you,’” laughs LaBute. “And he said, ‘Oh, you saw the movie, you hate the character.’ And she said, ‘No, I hate YOU.’”

“People wanted to slap me, they had a visceral reaction against me,” recalls Eckhart. “You know, interestingly enough, I can

understand the women, but there were men, as well, that really were upset. On the other hand a lot of guys pulled me aside, and said, ‘You know what, I know he did a bad thing, but I really like how Chad did business.’”

US distributors were similarly confused. Though the film won the Film-Maker’s trophy at Sundance 1997 (“It was electric,” remembers Eckhart, “the audience weren’t breathing”), it took months before Sony Pictures Classics bought it on the basis that they “couldn’t stop thinking about it even though it scared them”, according to LaBute. “It’s a movie where there’s no physical violence,” explains Edwards, “and yet it’s probably one of the more disturbing movies I’ve ever seen.”

Indeed, so incomprehensible are the depths of Chad’s callousness that viewers were desperate to believe he cares for Christine, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary (“I left her sobbing in the hotel room, then I walked over to Pizza Hut,” he gloats). “I think I was very careful not to make that true,” says LaBute. “I know what you’re doing,” warns Eckhart, “you’re trying to do what everybody does and it’s just not there. You’re trying to find an excuse for his behaviour and that’s just not the movie, the movie is that he’s a complete bastard.”

So what does motivate Chad, then? Anger? Greed? Cold-heartedness? Boredom? “Hold on for just one second... I was just talking to my lawyers to see if I can answer that,” laughs LaBute, before singularly failing to do so. “I don’t want to be mysterious, but as a filmgoer, sometimes I don’t want to know the motivations of the actor, I just want him to know.” For this reason, an epilogue in which Chad waxes not-so-lyrical about his troubled youth was excised early on. “We came to the realisation that Chad was more interesting as someone you couldn’t wrap your mind around,” explains LaBute.

In the end, then, all we’re left with is Chad’s own explanation of why he carried out this unconscionable assault – three words that say as much about corporate America as they do about the character himself; three words that sum up the pernicious narcissism of the entire me-me-me generation; three words that are, perhaps, even more chilling than “let’s hurt somebody”. Those three words? “Because I could.” **TF**

ALLSTAR, PHOTO 12, RONALD GRANT ARCHIVE, WIREIMAGE.COM

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

In The Company Of (Mad)Men

Millennial man angst made Hollywood’s drones go to increasingly bonkers lengths to escape the daily grind. See *Office Space* (working stiff becomes fraudster), *American Psycho* (working stiff becomes serial killer), *Fight Club* (working stiff becomes schizo-terrorist), and *Primer* (working stiff becomes time traveller).



Neil LaBute

Explored the limits of human cruelty again in the equally brutal (but not quite as good) *Your Friends And Neighbors* and the gender-reversed *The Shape Of Things*, before inflicting some of his own with an unwise update of *The Wicker Man*. Has recently made mainstream feints with *Lakeview Terrace* and the upcoming *Death At A Funeral* (see page 122).



Aaron Eckhart

Gets accosted by an altogether more genial breed of fan thanks to whip-smart indies such as *Erin Brockovich* and *Thank You For Smoking*, not to mention his, ahem, multifaceted turn in *The Dark Knight*.



Matt Malloy

Excels as white-collar wingmen in everything from *Choke* to *Hitch* and *The Bounty Hunter*.



Stacey Edwards

Continues to captivate the un-fairer sex, most notably as a hot mom in *Superbad*.