

STEALING HARVARD

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Making a smart movie about not-so-smart people can be a challenging proposition. But director Bruce McCulloch, who created his share of wild comedy as a member of the innovative North-of-the-Border comedy troupe, The Kids in the Hall, saw a good opportunity with *Stealing Harvard* of telling a story about the have-nots rather than the haves. “I’m not that interested in people who get what they want in life,” he notes. “I’m drawn to people who are in over their heads, who are having trouble, or who can’t quite communicate perfectly.”

Screenwriter Peter Tolan describes *Stealing Harvard* as a journey about “not-too-bright guys getting themselves into a not-too-good situation and handling it not-too-well...although it’s all for a good cause.”

Producer Susan Cavan, who produced McCulloch’s previous films, admits that the director could connect with the script on a somewhat personal level. “I knew Bruce would relate to John’s predicament in the story because he comes from a similar kind of family, and he takes care of a lot of people,” she says.

At the foundation of *Stealing Harvard* is a study in friendship, however fraught with difficulties it may be, between two young men whose brain wattage is perhaps less than illuminating. “John is Everyman, only not as bright as I hope Everyman is,” says screenwriter Tolan. “He’s not a take-charge guy, so he gets buffeted around by external forces, and things begin to snowball because he doesn’t really stand up for himself.

“Duff, on the other hand, is your friend from high school who never grew up. We all have one of those. You feel sorry for this friend and are a little embarrassed by him. But there’s a history there that you can’t ignore, even when your instincts are pulling you the other way.”

And then there’s family. “Patty is the sister from hell,” adds Tolan. “Just horribly incorrect and socially blunt, but also great fun.”

Such characters, in addition to a plethora of equally colorful characters who dot the *Stealing Harvard* landscape, made for a combustible combination and a casting challenge for Bruce McCulloch. As John, the director selected Jason Lee, who’s enjoyed considerable success over the past few years as a performer who can easily move between leading and supporting roles in a wide range of projects. “I’d seen Jason in Kevin Smith’s films as well as *Mumford*,” McCulloch notes, “and I liked his quality of being an atypical leading man. He can pull off playing a man trapped in a cage, which is what John’s predicament is in the film.”

Jason Lee was, in turn, enticed by the project. “When you have a screenplay by Peter Tolan and you have an opportunity to work with Joe Roth, you jump! *Stealing Harvard* has a comedic edge and the comedy is dialogue-driven. I liked its subtle, intelligent humor.” Lee was also attracted by the notion of working with the man at the helm. “You don’t question people with Bruce McCulloch’s history of comedy,” he notes.

Stealing Harvard marked a reunion between McCulloch and Tom Green, as the director had cast the actor in a small role in his previous feature, *Superstar*. “I was really impressed with Tom’s conceptual creations and his commitment to what he was doing,” says McCulloch. “I knew that he had this complicated comedic brain, and that we could collaborate on and embellish Duff’s character together.”

McCulloch notes that he and Green work in a form that was familiar to both of them. “It’s the ‘what if, what if, what if’ school of “Saturday Night Live” and “Kids in the Hall” kind of humor,” he explains. Green describes Duff as “a bit of a scam artist, a con man. His old friend John comes to him for help because he figures that Duff is either smart or stupid enough to help him to get some money, possibly in a semi-illegal fashion. They end up engaging in some adventures together, and that’s where the real fun begins.”

Then there is the unconventional sister whose demands set the plot in motion. Megan Mullally describes her character, Patty, as “a well-meaning mess. She thinks of herself as an independent spirit, but basically, she’s outrageous in everything she does. The great thing about Patty is that she says what’s on her mind. She’s certainly not trying to be offensive to anybody...she’s just going to straighten you out.”

Mullally didn’t do any specific research for the part, but did have a secret role model in mind. “There’s someone I grew up with--I won’t say who--who reminds me of Patty. And it was inescapable for me not to think about her when I was on set,” she admits.

Balancing out the cast was formidable, but McCulloch found a perfect piece to his puzzle when he cast Leslie Mann in the role of Elaine. “I think that Leslie is super-quirky, super-sexy and she really embodied what I wanted her character to be, which is not to just be ‘the girlfriend.’ As the film progresses, Mann gets to throw food off the table, get crazy in the middle of the night and kick butt with Jason and Tom. She also has a slightly weird relationship with her father. I knew that Leslie could combine the responsible ‘girlfriend’ with the wackiness of the rest of the story.”

Rounding out the cast, McCulloch invited Tammy Blanchard--who received rave reviews and an Emmy nomination for her performance as the young Judy

Garland in the ABC TV miniseries “Me and My Shadow: Life With Judy Garland” -- to make her big-screen debut as Noreen, the undisputed joy and, unwittingly, the bane of her Uncle John’s existence. “I loved Noreen’s spirit,” says Blanchard, “and her eyes, which are sort of like an old soul. You kind of melt when she looks at you.” Blanchard found the script “funny and sweet,” and like McCulloch, found inspiration in her own family. “Noreen is like one of my favorite cousins, Crystal, who’s so outgoing and good-natured. John is like several of my uncles, who are all fabulous and caring. Also, the story is based around family values, and that’s the most important thing in the world to me.”

As filming got underway, a decision was made to subtly alter Tom Green’s appearance as Duff. “I put a cap on my front teeth because I wanted to change my voice and speech pattern a little bit,” says the actor. “Also, I purposely wanted to wear tighter-fitting clothes to make me feel different, and affect my posture.”

All of the film’s actors echoed equal enthusiasm for director Bruce McCulloch throughout the shooting schedule on practical locations and sound stages in and around Los Angeles. “I never questioned Bruce’s directing choices for me because I just knew he knew what he was doing,” notes Jason Lee. “He was awesome.”

For Tom Green, McCulloch had been the clincher to his participation all along. “Although I loved the script, the fact that Bruce was going to direct it made it just perfect. And making the movie lived up to my expectations. Bruce is really a kind of goofy guy. He makes me laugh a lot when he goes off into these weird places. So if you’re laughing between takes, and the mood of the set is up, then it makes it easy to come to work every day.”

“Bruce has a great sense of humor,” agrees Megan Mullally. “And he was wonderful with helping me play with my part, experiment with it, and come up

with ways of doing a scene that I wouldn't necessarily have come up with right away."

Producer Susan Cavan adds "Bruce has several strengths as a director. Firstly, he's a skilled and funny writer, so his work in supervising the final script stages is intense and unquestionably contributes to an inspired shooting script that exploits the particular talents of his cast to the hilt. He's also very much an actor's director, able to inspire his cast and motivate their performances. So he has his unique idea about the world of his film, and it will be cinematic, fresh and twisted."

McCulloch expresses mutual regard for his *Stealing Harvard* cast. "All the actors did such an amazing job. They made their roles funnier and more complex than they appeared on the page."