

Film Close-Up: Adam Sandler

by Joey_Berlin

As Hollywood comic Adam Sandler was about to turn 40, he finally felt ready to expand his one-note career and stray far from the silly comedies that established him as a superstar. The powerful drama "Reign Over Me" hands Sandler his most serious role ever, and the funnyman tackles the challenge with unexpected passion and skill.

Sandler stars in the new film, written and directed by Mike Binder, as a New York City dentist whose life was devastated when his wife and daughters perished on 9/11. Several years later, he is still emotionally down and out, a lost soul who has simply resigned from life. In a chance encounter, he bumps into his old college friend played by Don Cheadle and the men rekindle their friendship.

ADAM SANDLER - Adam Sandler plays a man traumatized by the Sept. 11 attack in the drama 'Reign Over Me.' CNS Photo courtesy of Tracy Bennett.

For Sandler, a "Saturday Night Live" veteran who has not exactly been a favorite of the critics since his 1995 big screen breakthrough in "Billy Madison," it must be gratifying that "Reign Over Me" is receiving some of his best notices ever. But the Brooklyn-born Sandler is not looking to walk away from comedy altogether. In fact, his big film coming this summer, "I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry," is a comedy in which Sandler plays a straight, single New York fireman who pretends to be gay to qualify for domestic benefits.

Q: It is understandable that you would want to venture away from comedy, but what was it about "Reign Over Me" that made you want to do this particular role?

A: I read the script a while ago. The first time I read it, I thought it was a pretty incredible movie but I was afraid of it, so I just put it away. I told my guys, "Tell that guy thank you, but I can't do it." I was kind of scared of it. Then one night like a month later, it was next to my bed and I read it again. It was very moving to me and I just couldn't stop thinking about it. I wanted to challenge myself so I talked to my guys and said, "Can you ask Mike Binder if he's still interested in doing it?" I can't articulate why I liked it so much, but it hurt my heart when I read it, so much. It also made me laugh. I just wanted to accept the challenge of doing that role.

Q: Were you confident right away that you could pull it off?

A: I was terrified. Once I agreed to do it, I was the most scared I'd ever been. I remember talking to Don. We would rehearse on our own and at the end of our rehearsals I would say to Don, "Do you have any idea who your guy is yet?" He'd say, "No, no." I was so afraid.

Q: You had already done "Punch Drunk Love," which was a more dramatic role. Why were you so afraid of taking on this one?

A: I think it was because I had to just create a guy and I wasn't sure I could do it. I was pretty sure on "Punch Drunk Love" I could do it. When PTA (filmmaker Paul Thomas Anderson) gave me that script and he was telling me about it, it was like, "Oh, OK. I can do that." This movie, every time Mike would tell me, "Hey, you can do it, you can do it," in my head I was like, "I don't know if I can do it. I hope I can do it. I sure want to. I don't want to let you down. I don't want to let anybody down who has been through this tragedy."

So I put a lot of pressure on myself and I think maybe that is what I was afraid of. But I committed to it, eventually.

Q: To research the role, did you talk to people who have lost their families?

A: I met a lot of people, yeah, through their therapy sessions and learned what people were going through. It's actually post-traumatic stress disorder or something. They wanted it to get out into the public more, so it wasn't easy for them. I would only come if they were OK with it and if they needed me to leave, I would leave. But normally they would just let me sit with them and listen. They just wanted to get the word out about what they were going through.

Q: What was your emotional state while you were shooting the film and how did you get into that mode?

A: I prepared for a long time and I tried to stay as focused as I can be. It was painful to do. I know it was very important, the part, and it was important to feel as much as I could. So I tried to just be prepared for every day. It wasn't like movies I've done in the past where I'm laughing and having a great time on the set. It was definitely heavier.

Q: After this experience, are you looking to try more roles that scare you?

A: Uh, no. I was hanging out with Cheadle the other day and Don said, "Any other serious stuff coming?" And I was like, "You know, after that one, I'm cool with just staying away from that for a while." I had a headache almost every day on the set. I was in my trailer. Normally on movies, I go to my trailer and have 10 guys hanging out with me and we're laughing and then they're like, "Adam, come to set," and I'm like, "Ah, I gotta go do this." But on this one, I was there all alone with my I-Pod. I was learning how to play the drums every day. It was a lot of work, man, and emotionally, I don't cry in real life. I'm just pretty light and I don't get too heavy. I snap a lot, but I get over it pretty quickly. With this guy, he had to hold his pain and I tried to do so throughout the shoot as much as I could. So I'm in no hurry to do it again.

Q: So where do you go from here? Do you want to do just comedy then?

A: I don't know. Eventually, I might get caught up in something that I didn't know was coming. But I've done some comedies since this movie, just doin' what I do.

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