

Thank you for Smoking

BY
DAVID S. COHEN

In the last “From Script to Screen,” we looked at *Good Night, and Good Luck*, a film about a media hero for the ages.

It’s a serious-minded film about Edward R. Murrow, a man who used words to challenge and face down a would-be tyrant.

That was the 1950s, though. A lot has changed since Ed Murrow’s days.

For one, Murrow chain-smoked onscreen—unimaginable for a modern network anchor. Peter Jennings may have smoked just as much, but only in his early career could he smoke on the air.

You see, smoking is bad for you. But you didn’t need me to tell you that, did you? In fact, you’ve probably known that your whole life. Jason Reitman has. That’s one reason he was drawn to the story of Nick Naylor, the spin doctor protagonist of *Thank You For Smoking*.

Naylor seems in many ways like Edward R. Murrow’s opposite. Murrow was a newsman, committed to impartial reporting. Naylor is a lobbyist, manipulative, shrewd, an expert at winning the audience even if he can’t win the argument.

Where Murrow was earnest, Naylor is glib. Where Murrow was admired, Naylor is despised. Murrow suffers through his commercial obligations, while Naylor is an enthusiastic

mouthpiece for his corporate clients.

They have something in common: Both face down a power-grab by a senator. Except instead of Red-baiting, though, *Thank You For Smoking*’s Senator Finistirre is trying to fight teen smoking.

Naylor is like Murrow’s evil twin. Except he’s not evil. He’s the movie’s hero.

Welcome to the 21st century.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

Thank You For Smoking is adapted from the book by Christopher Buckley and written and directed by Reitman, who makes his feature

debut. It stars Aaron Eckhart as Naylor, along with a lengthy list of notables.

The Fox Searchlight release opens March 17 in selected cities with a wide release to follow.

Naylor faces death threats, kidnappers and—worst of all—the liberal Vermont senator (William H. Macy) who wants a law putting a skull & crossbones on cigarette packs. All this while trying to impart some basic life lessons to his 13-year-old son Joey.

Novelist Christopher Buckley says in the film’s production notes that he was inspired to write the book by the appearance of a





PAGE 36: **Aaron Eckhart** stars as Big Tobacco spokesman Nick Naylor in *Thank You For Smoking*, written by Jason Reitman (screenplay) and Christopher Buckley (novel). ABOVE: **Eric Haberman** and **Aaron Eckhart** in Fox Searchlight's satirical comedy *Thank You For Smoking*.

representative of the Tobacco Institute on a 1992 "McNeil-Lehrer" program on PBS.

"It was love at first sight," Buckley says. "I thought, 'What an interesting job that must be. Get up mornings, brush your teeth, have breakfast, kiss the kids, and go off and sell ... death.' Thus was born Nick Naylor of the Academy of Tobacco Studies."

Reitman's love-at-first-sight moment came several years later when he got the book as a gift from a friend.

"[She] said to me, 'I read this book. Jason, this book's made for you. It's the funniest book I ever read.' I picked it up and read the first line, and it just spoke to me. It has this libertarian sense of humor. It was the first time I read something, and I thought 'I really want to make this into a movie.' I read it, and all I could see was a movie. Images that were in the final film popped into my head."

Reitman doesn't like being told what to do, and he associated liberalism with political correctness and a kind of smothering authoritarianism. Buckley's breezy libertarianism hit a nerve.

From that point on, Reitman made writing and directing a feature of *Thank You For Smoking* a major goal.

He made shorts, working the festival circuit. He also directed commercials.

But when he told his agent he wanted to make *Thank You For Smoking*, says Reitman, "He looked into it and got back to me and said

'Jason, it's going to be very difficult.'"

Mel Gibson's company, Icon, had bought the movie rights and had spent a lot of money developing the project. Several writers had tried adapting it, but none had cracked it.

"[The agent] said it was going to be tough to make my version of the movie, which I wanted to do on a small budget. So I said, 'Put me in the room.'"

Reitman remembers going in very aggressively. "What they were trying to make at the time was a \$50 million Mel Gibson broad comedy, and that just didn't make any sense when talking about smoking and politics. If you make it for \$50 million, that means you have to cut its balls off. I didn't want to do that; I wanted to make it for \$5 million.

"I got in the room and basically berated them," he says. "I said 'This could be *Election*. This could be *Citizen Ruth*. Let me go in and be your cheap Alexander Payne.'" To prove his point, he went away and spent a weekend writing the first act on spec. It worked.

"They said 'yes, this is the voice we're looking for, this is the attitude we're looking for,' and they hired me. They hired me for scale, and I turned in a draft three or four months later. They had no notes. I got a call from Mel Gibson telling me how much he liked it. We talked for half an hour. It was great. He liked how ballsy it was." So far, so good.

He never spoke to Gibson about the script again.

Jason Reitman on cutting your favorite scenes

You have to be ruthless. That's a tough thing to do as a screenwriter and director—to cut your favorite scenes. I don't know how it happened; but my dad [Ivan] taught me very early to take pleasure in cutting your babies, so it doesn't really hurt me anymore.

You get to a place where you love cutting your favorite scenes because then you're making the whole thing better. Once you get that attitude, you're so free, both in editing and in writing, because you're always looking for the best way. There's something exhilarating about it, about knowing you're doing the right thing, and about knowing you're getting rid of something fantastic. But you have to get there. If you're being too precious, you're not doing a good job. You've got to be merciless. We've got 30 minutes of DVD footage. Great. It's not about that.

A JOYFUL NOISE

At least he had a script, though.

Reitman loved Buckley's attitude and kept that intact as much as he could. "There's a frankness in the conversations. There's a self-aware honesty to the characters. The libertarian politics. And I wanted [the script] to be entertaining like the book was."

Not just entertaining, but joyful.

"I think that comes from Nick's nature—being joyful," he says. "He never apologizes for what he does. He has a kind of humorous common sense attitude."

So he kept the script light and nimble, like its hero.

But Reitman's, um, spin on the novel introduced a new theme: parenting.

"The book is very funny; but halfway through, it turns into almost a caper about who did the kidnapping, which wasn't very interesting for me."

Instead, one line from the book caught his attention, a moment where a TV reporter asks Nick what he would do if he caught his son smoking.

The son, Joey, was a very minor character, says Reitman, but "I thought wow, you can probably lie to everyone you know. You can

probably even lie to your children, but it's hard to lie to your children. It just struck me as the final wall for them."

In real life, says Reitman, the most important question tobacco lobbyists and their ilk must often face is "How do you live with yourself?"

"I thought the most interesting way to examine that would be through his son," he says.

If Nick is someone who wants to spin the whole world, how does he spin his son? Would he really spin his son? Could his son be a mirror for him? And if his son can like him, can we like him, too? So, I took the character of Joey and expanded him like crazy. To that extent, it became a script about parenting."

That doesn't mean the script turned warm and fuzzy. In the spirit of the book, Nick and his lobbyist pals call themselves "The M.O.D.

"So, cigarettes are the location. It's not really about cigarettes."

POLITICALLY INCORRECT

With a solid script in hand and no notes from Icon, *Thank You For Smoking* promptly went ... nowhere.

"Nobody wanted to make it," says Reitman. "There was a ton of money against it on a film that I wanted to make for \$5 million. That big a percentage of the budget having already been spent on words that weren't even going to be used was hard for anyone to comprehend.

"And beyond that was the politics. This was a film that was not liberal in any sense of the word, and this is a very liberal town. And it dealt with tobacco and cigarettes, which scared people as well. At one studio they said, 'Loved your script, thought it was really funny, would do it if Nick Naylor had a huge change of heart at the end and went to

disappointment that I have."

Sacks was ready to buy the rights on the spot, cash on the barrelhead.

"It was amazing because most independent filmmakers, your dream is to find that guy with a lot of money who just wants to be your white knight. And here he was. Yet, still it took over a year to get Warner Bros. and Icon to call him back and sell him the rights to the book.

"With Warner Bros., it wasn't even like 'we're still thinking'; it was like 'we're not going to make this movie, but you can't have it.'"

Once the rights were in hand, though, the movie came together very quickly. Aaron Eckhart signed on to play Nick. Robert Duvall agreed to play a tobacco mogul. Katie Holmes joined on to play the TV reporter who seduces Nick.

Suddenly, Reitman was going to get his chance to make the movie.



ABOVE: Writer-director **Jason Reitman**. RIGHT: **Rob Lowe** and **Adam Brody** in *Thank You For Smoking*. PHOTOS: Dale Robinette. Courtesy of Fox Searchlight.



Squad," where M.O.D. stands for Merchants of Death. The politicians are scandalous, the media are whores, the public seems to be made up mainly of lunatics. In the midst of all this, it's not so surprising that Nick can come off as a voice of sanity.

Reitman compares the story to another film he likes, *Citizen Ruth*.

"It's about this woman who's had three or four abortions already and gets caught in the middle of a controversy. Abortion becomes the location, to play out how insane people get. Cigarettes are a lot like abortion. It doesn't matter whether you're a smoker or a non-smoker. Everybody has an opinion.

work for some liberal organization.' Another studio head said, 'Loved your script, thought it was very funny, but what the hell is the son doing in there? This is supposed to be *Wag The Dog*, isn't it?' And we struck out. The project basically died.

Reitman moved on. He wrote a script for Fox and kept making commercials.

At the end of 2003, he met David Sacks, who had become rich from his role in founding PayPal and wanted to make films.

"He loved the book, he loved my script, he said 'Let's go do it.' I thought when I met him, 'This poor schmuck. He's in love with this script. He's going to have to suffer the

"It was very exciting and very intimidating at the same time because I had this great book that has a lot of devoted fans. I had this great cast where, no matter what age you are, there's someone you love. So, if this movie doesn't work, it's really my fault."

KEEPING IT REAL

Reitman has thought about this project for years, but even so, he found that some of his favorite bits just didn't work onscreen.

The film's opening scene, with Nick on a talk show with a group of anti-smoking activists and a boy dying of cancer, was longer in the script than in the film and showed more

of Nick's charm and guile.

The highlight of the scene—a bit that remains in the film—is Nick's announcement of a \$50 million campaign funded by the tobacco industry to curtail smoking. That helps propel him into the rest of the story.

In the script, the announcement led to a payoff later, a scene where Nick's people propose a skull & crossbones to go on every pack of cigarettes, but the skull is the "Have a Nice Day" smiley face.

"Have a Nice Death" goes the slogan.

"We had to cut it. Shot it but couldn't use it. Everything in the movie is somewhat believable, but it pushes the reality a little too far.

"In a satire you are pushing reality a little. It's a slightly pushed universe. But, still you have to hold to the tone that you create. You say in the movie 'this is the world that you live in,' and you have to stick to it."

In the film's climax, in a senate hearing, Nick gets to answer the question that had grabbed Reitman's attention in the book.

He delivers a passionate defense of personal choice, finishing by saying that if Joey wanted to smoke when he turned 18, he'd buy him his first pack.

Then he walks out of the hearing room into an empty hallway, and for the first time, in silence, his confidence seems to crack, even if for just a moment.

"That's what I always wanted," says Reitman. "What Nick just said was something pretty big. He basically lived up to this idea that if you're going to believe in free choice, you have to live it every moment, even when your son is going to be smoking cigarettes."

Then follows perhaps the biggest cut from Reitman's script.

In the screenplay, as Nick speaks to the press after his testimony, he notices Joey about to light up a cigarette. Without thinking about it, he slaps the cigarette out of Joey's hands—a moment caught by news cameras.

When the bit completely fell flat in early screenings of the film, Reitman realized it was a false note.

Nick and Joey grow closer through the film, says Reitman, as Nick tries to teach Joey the importance of taking responsibility for one's own actions.

"Nick is saying through the whole film it's about how you argue. It's not about the subject. Is this about cigarettes? Of course, it's not. It's about arguing about cigarettes. It's about talk.

"So, if Joey pulls out a cigarette at the end of

the movie, he's missed everything his dad has told him. Nick's not in this because he likes cigarettes or smokes cigarettes or believes in cigarettes; he's the public defender for corporations. So, for Joey to pull a cigarette out, it wouldn't matter that Nick smacks away the cigarette—because Joey missed the point. And that's bad storytelling.

"So, we took that scene out and found a way into the epilogue through a short piece of voiceover."

FREE PUBLICITY

Thank You For Smoking has been either blessed or cursed with two controversies that gave the film a boatload of free publicity. The first was a dispute at the Toronto Film Festival between Paramount Classics and Fox Searchlight over which company had bought distribution rights on the film.

"[Paramount] got very close. Then they went out to celebrate, and, in the meantime, Fox made a real deal. Someone who was



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interviewed in Toronto anonymously said, 'What's Paramount going to do, take them to handshake court?' Then that became a film festival term, 'handshake court.'

"So, for a week there were all these articles about who owned the film."

Then, at the Sundance Film Festival, there was a snafu with the print that turned the film into something of a media sensation.

As Reitman explains it, when the over-worked Sundance projectionist was splicing the film's six reels into a single platter, he mistook a dip to black near the end of reel two for the end of the reel and snipped off about 12 seconds of action.

Those 12 seconds happened to be a scene of Nick having sex with Heather. In other words, it was a Katie Holmes sex scene.

"I look over at the Fox guys," says Reitman, "and my first thought is, 'I can't believe it! They cut this scene out of my movie, and they didn't even tell me. I've been talking to these guys every single day.' But, that couldn't happen. They were equally shocked, apparently. My point person at Fox was staring at me thinking 'I can't believe he cut the scene out of the movie without telling me!'"

In fact, the film was lying on the floor in

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the booth and would be found a few days later and restored to the print. But not before another screening the next morning where Reitman had to announce that the scene was missing.

After that second screening, though, the *L.A. Times* picked up the story of the missing sex scene, and the press had a field day. Conspiracy theories abounded. Had Tom Cruise paid someone off? Had the Scientologists gotten to the print?

Had Reitman done it himself as a publicity stunt?

That last suggestion, he says, is laughable.

"Fox has such high security, I couldn't get near [the print] if I tried. They send a guard everywhere the print goes." Indeed, any film with a Katie Holmes sex scene must be

considered prime piracy material now.

But, the real punch line comes in that the scene's not sexy.

"The truth is, it's a humorous scene playing the scene off against the voiceover."

Thank You For Smoking fits Reitman's vision of a light, ironic comedy with a libertarian bent. It doesn't come off as pro-tobacco, though smokers will find plenty of lines to quote to their critics.

In fact, careful viewers will note that not once in the entire film does a character actually light up.

And in real life, does Jason Reitman smoke?

"God, of course not!" he says. "It's not about smoking." (i)

DAVID S. COHEN is a freelance writer, photographer and documentary filmmaker whose byline has appeared in periodicals around the world, including *Premiere* and *Discover* magazines. He is a frequent contributor to *Variety* and is co-producer of the award-winning documentary *Silver Dreamer*.

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