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Daily



REINER'S ROMANCE

Director takes literary road to bring Luke Wilson, Kate Hudson together in 'Alex & Emma'

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Rob Reiner, left, directs Kate Hudson and Luke Wilson on the set of "Alex & Emma." "I'm interested in the process by which the male character has to come back around and understand something about himself in order to be with a woman," says Reiner.

Dr. Robert

Director Reiner, back after 4 years with 'Alex & Emma,' informs his romantic comedies with lessons from real life

By **Evan Henderson**
Staff Writer

A guy who has directed three of American Film Institute's top 100 love stories should know a thing or two about the birds and the bees.

Meet Rob Reiner, the silver screen's answer to Dr. Phil. "I remember he had this wonderful way of kvetching, and you'd just want to bring your romantic problems to him," recalls Daphne Zuniga, who starred in the 1985 Reiner comedy "The Sure Thing." "So he'd commiserate. 'Well, you know, that's the way guys are,' and you always feel like he was going through something."

"He sits there and kvetches and he could literally, like, run this country," Zuniga continues. Maybe he was "going through something." "The Sure Thing" was released in 1985, six years after Reiner's divorce from Penny Marshall and four years

before he married his second wife, Michele Singer. Reiner, the former Smothers Brothers writer and "All in the Family" star, isn't looking to produce an autobiography every time he steps behind the camera, but he admits that his own matters of the heart provide thematic fodder for his movies.

"Absolutely," Reiner says, "The whole subject of 'When Harry Met Sally ...' was what happens between men and women. You can't make a film like that without exploring your personal life. The only thing that will make it good and ring true is if I take something from my life. Hopefully, people will identify with it."

"Alex & Emma," Reiner's latest, is closer thematically to the director's "When Harry Met Sally ..." (No. 25 on the AFI list) than to the other two AFI-honored romances: "The Princess Bride" (No. 88), Reiner contends, was a fairy tale, while the sparks between Michael Douglas and Annette Bening in "The American President" (No. 75) took place against a backdrop of the environment, gun control and political privacy. Still, Andrew

Shepherd, the fictional president played by Douglas, did spend an awful lot of time figuring out how to give activist Sydney Wade flowers.

No political distractions this

time around. In "Alex & Emma," which tries to

counter-program a few box-office dollars away from "The Hulk" beginning Friday, the premise is something like this: Boy meets girl. Boy pines after the wrong girl. Boy writes the right and wrong girl into his novel. Boy finally gets a clue.

Luke Wilson ("The Royal Tenenbaums") plays a writer under the gun to complete a novel in 30 days or else face the wrath of the Cuban mafia. Kate Hudson ("Almost Famous") is a prim stenographer hired by Wilson to type as he dictates. Alex writes himself, Emma and his fantasy woman (Sophie Marceau) into his romantic

novel, allowing fiction to mirror real life.

The film's inspiration is, of all things, the experience of that noted romantic Russian Fyodor Dostoevsky, who produced the short novel "The Gambler" in 30 days and ended up falling for his stenographer.

Men who change

"(The movie) explores the process writers go through in writing stories, so I related to it," Reiner says of Jeremy Leven's script. "I also related to the characters. In 'When Harry Met Sally ...' Harry goes through a lot in order to be with a woman who's right in front of him. The same thing happens in 'The Sure Thing.'"

"In all of my romantic comedies, the guys are not as developed and the women are much more emotionally grounded, much more together," he continues. "I'm interested in

the process by which the male character has to come back around and understand something about himself in order to be with a woman. That's the way I am with the women I've been with."

Reiner, who has previously struck gold with his romantic pairings (Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan; Douglas and Bening) expects the Wilson/Hudson coupling should generate plenty of on-screen chemistry.

"I had a hunch it would be there," says the director, who also appears in the film as Alex's editor. "They're good friends off camera. Luke has always had a little bit of a crush on Kate, so there's this safe sexual tension because she's married (to Black Crowes rocker Chris Robinson)."

Those who believe Reiner is returning to the romantic well once too often should know that "Alex & Emma" was something of a fallback choice. Reiner and producing partner Alan Greisman were developing an adaptation of Richard North Patterson's "Protect and Defend," a political novel set against the backdrop of the abortion debate.

"Then 9-11 happened," says Greisman. "Rob had run across the 'Alex & Emma' script, and we decided to put the other one aside and see if we could do this one instead. It seemed more propitious."

Genre hopping is certainly nothing new for Reiner, whose debut film was the mock

rockumentary "This Is Spinal Tap." Interspersed with the romances were the hits "Misery" and "A Few Good Men." There have also been flops, most notably 1994's "North" starring a pre-"Lord of the Rings" Elijah Wood as a globe-trotting 11-year-old.

But if you're looking for a pattern in Reiner's choices, don't bother. He doesn't have one.

"It's not a question of a favorite genre," he says. "What I'm looking for in all my movies is a way to find my way into the story. What in this can I connect with and relate to in some aspect of my life? As a result of working on this movie, I realized I had a greater understanding of myself and the way I related to women."

Back from public service

"Alex & Emma" marked the end of a self-imposed filmmaking hiatus for Reiner, whose last film was "The Story of Us" in 1999. During the ensuing years, he prepared the California Children and Families Initiative for the 1998 ballot and, at Gov. Gray Davis' request, chaired the state commission for that program. Reiner and his wife also formed the I Am Your Child Foundation to promote early childhood education.

Next up is a more personal film: "The Home Planet," a story about an astronaut who undergoes a profound,

life-changing experience while on a mission in space.

The idea harkens back to a sketch Reiner wrote for the Smothers Brothers some 30 years ago. The Smotherses played a couple of omnipotent creators of wisdom who would generate slogans — "A stitch in time saves nine," "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" — which they would then send down to Earth via a messenger.

The sketch ended with the two men balking at sending the message "Do unto others ..." to Earth out of fear that the people on Earth aren't ready to receive it.

"Whoever has that philosophy to really understand, listen and preach — people like Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King — they all wind up dead," says Reiner. "Astronauts from all over the world who go up into space have all had the same experience. They all basically understood what John Lennon was saying in his song 'Imagine': 'Imagine there are no countries,' imagine there are no religions."

"This was the first time they really felt in their bones what it was like to be part of a family of man. They all saw their countries and their continents and realized that they were all just living on one little place called Earth. To me, that was the great discovery in space, not that we brought back some moon rocks."

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Reiner to complete his novel, hires a prim stenographer writing himself, the stenographer and his fantasy "Alex & Emma."

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