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Will 'The Heat' Start a New Franchise?

Sophia Stein · Thursday, June 27th, 2013

The Heat, directed by Paul Feig, is an adventure akin to *48 Hrs* — with a healthy shot of estrogen. In their most recent collaboration since *Bridesmaids*, Feig and comedian Melissa McCarthy team up with mega-star Sandra Bullock for an action-packed, female-buddy, cop movie. Bullock plays the Fed; McCarthy, the Fuzz. When by-the-book, Federal Agent Sarah Ashburn is paired up with no-prisoners-barred, Boston Detective Mullins, to take down a Boston drug lord, what results is an R-rated comedy replete with profane, ballsy epithets that scale Shakespearean heights.

Feig has cited how his approach to filmmaking has been shaped by "The Bechdel Test," introduced by cartoonist Alison Bechdel in her 1985 comic strip titled *The Rule*, in which a female character claims only to watch those movies which satisfy the following criteria:

1. Are there two or more women in the movie that have names?

2. Do they talk to each other?

3. Do they talk to each other about something other than a man?

Yes, yes, and yes. Feig squarely is aiming to elevate the stature of comediennes in film. As with the ground-breaking *Bridesmaids*, *The Heat* strives to re-innovate a classic comic form. Feig's work in *The Heat*, resembles the raw brilliance of Mel Brooks' comic satires.

"There is a thaw going on right now. We have to get more ladies to be big superstars. That's my goal," proclaims Feig. Ladies (and gentlemen) — what's not to like about that! Whether eschewing chick-flick genres for something more macho will satisfy his *Bridesmaids* base, remains to be seen, but Feig takes a real stab at it — no pun or spoilers intended.

I recently had the opportunity to sit down with Paul Feig at the Ritz Carlton in San Francisco to discuss his collaboration with his leading ladies and his approach to comedy.

Sophia Stein: You and Melissa McCarthy are close friends and neighbors; how did you first meet?

Paul Feig: We met on *Bridesmaids*. I have great shame that I did not know of Melissa before *Bridesmaids*, because I've been auditioning the funniest people in the world (I feel!), for years, but I realize that we were just always out of sync! She was a regular on a show, and I tend to not go out and see a lot of live comedy when I'm casting. Towards the end of the casting process for *Bridesmaids*, we were looking at a bunch of actresses for Megan, and we had really funny people, but just that feeling of – do we have *the* person? Kristen [Wiig] and Annie [Mumolo] said, "You should see our friend Melissa McCarthy. We were all in The Groundlings together, and people used to line up around the block to watch her perform!" Melissa came in and blew us all away, with a *completely* different take on the character. The part was written as a slightly nervous,

desperate friend. Melissa came in and did this almost butch take. 'Oh, that's interesting,' I thought, 'she's going to play it gay.' We always do an improv section during auditions. I remember saying something like, "You're going over to Kristen's house. You want to hang out, but she doesn't want to hang out with you — see what happens." So Melissa starts doing this whole run about, "How can I meet guys?" "And we're gonna fuck these guys!" So she's not playing it gay?! It took like 30 seconds, "Wait, what?!," and then, "Wow, this is hilarious!" This was on a whole other level. All that crazy amazing sexuality — that all came from Melissa.

S2: How did you approach casting Ashburn & Mullins in *The Heat?*

PF: When the script first was sent to me, it was called *The Untitled Female Buddy Cop Comedy*, and I was told that Sandra Bullock was interested in doing it. That was it. Nobody said anything about the other role. So I started reading the screenplay, and for the first ten pages, I was experimenting with various actresses in my mind. Weirdly enough, Melissa and I were trying to figure out something to do together … but she was off shooting *Identity Thief*, so I figured, she's not going to be available for this. Ten pages in, I suddenly go, "Melissa … Melissa!" The minute her voice went into it, it was as if the part was tailor made for her. It became such a no-brainer. I was on an airplane, and the minute I landed, I phoned her manager: "She's got to read this script immediately!" The next day, Melissa wanted to do it.

S2: You tailor the roles to the actors. How did you customize the screenplay to fit Sandra and Melissa?

PF: It wasn't until we did a rehearsal together that we saw — 'OK, Sandra is going to play it a little more uptight. She has all these rules. She talks, and she talks too much, and she uses her hands when she talks, and she literally won't stop talking!' Melissa would just sit back and let Sandra hang herself — "You never shut up, you never fucking shut up! Stop using those hands!!" Sandra's going too fast, and Melissa is getting bugged … OK, that's the dynamic. So Katie and I went off and adjusted the script to incorporate that dynamic. But it was very close to what screenwriter Katie Dippold had already written. (I cannot stress enough, how good Katie's original script was!)

S2: This project came together atypically quickly —

PF: I read the script, eight weeks later we were in production. We shot for nine weeks (during which time, we were rewriting the whole time). We just finished editing! We started shooting the movie on July 5, 2012. So honestly, when the film is released on June 28, 2013, it will have been a little more than a year total – which, for a movie, is like a rocket ship! … *Originally, we were supposed to open April 5 — so it would have actually been less than a year from portal to portal! It was only because we were testing so well, that they moved us into the summer.*

S2: The epithets in this movie are like Shakespeare in heat! Scripted or improvised?

PF: Katie wrote a bunch, but that stuff tends to be improvised. Melissa is the "Queen of Swears." She doesn't talk that way in real life; it's just when she gets into that character. Melissa does this really crazy run against the cop who let the prisoner out, and I said, "OK, this next take, go F-bomb crazy." Sometimes, it was literally every other word. I always find people swearing very funny — if it's not mean-spirited, but it's just how they express themselves. It just makes me laugh for some reason. You can't do a movie about a bunch of bad guys and tough people, and they're all like, "Oh, Shucks." It just doesn't feel right. That's why I love R-rated comedy — because you can just go for it!

S2: Mullins nails the perp, Rojas, with a watermelon; was that scripted?

PF: That was something that just happened on set. Spoken Reasons (J.B.), the actor who plays Rojas, was like, "The perp is always African American, and that feels weird!" But I hired him because he was the funniest guy I found; I just loved him. And Melissa is white; so I said, let's just play into it. Suddenly, Melissa hits him with a watermelon. He thought it was funny, and I was the one who hesitated, "I'm not sure if we can get away with that!" So we covered ourselves. But the

first time we showed it to an audience, they went crazy! J.B.'s response is so funny: "I told you that you were a racist!"

S2: You have called *The Hangover* a revelation. How so?

PF: It was one of the first comedies that I had seen in a while to have a ticking clock and a high stakes story. Also, I thought that it was artistically shot, in a way that fit the comedy. In my career, I have written and directed a lot of character driven comedy. *Freaks and Geeks* was a very gentle show, and I love that too. But to get people to go to the movies, I want to give them a little more – some spectacle, some danger, a bit of action, violence — but all in the service of the comedy. Comedy doesn't have to be toothless, just riffing or only personal conversations. You have to have those, because those are what people are going to latch onto. But you also have to have a very strong emotional core of a story. The dramatic moves have to be right — and then you can tell it in a funny way.

S2: In this film, there is an edgy political under-belly of anger between the sexes —

PF: This film was really meant to be about two professional women who are great at their jobs, and who have not compromised their careers to get married and raise a family. They just didn't want that. The story is about how hard it is to support that dream. One of my favorite lines is: "It's never easy when you're involved." The anger comes from these varying styles of how the women relate to the world. I think there is an undercurrent of chauvinism in there — how it is o.k. for a man to be headstrong, but for a woman, it's like, "What are you doing?!" It was very important to me to make this story about strong, working women — and also about the difficulty of finding your support group among other women, female friendships.

S2: The thing about *Bridesmaids* that was so amazing, we got to see that really competitive, difficult edge of female friendships in a way that we've seldom seen on screen before.

PF: I love doing movies for women, about women. I always want to be in the zone where women go, "Oh, yes. That's me!" Versus romantic comedies, where it's all about plumbing the depths of love, like, and attraction — which is fine. I love when women (like with *Bridesmaids*) think, "That's me and my friends; that's how we talk!" I want to be honest that way.

S2: You are a proponent for creating leading roles for women in film. However, you recently commented that you want to eliminate the chick flick — that you think that it sometimes panders to women. What did you mean by that?

PF: The chick flick is basically Hollywood going, "OK, ladies, we know all you care about is romance." Look, I love romance; it drives us all. But at the same time, I feel like women have been fed this steady diet, to the point where they concede, "Oh yeah, that's what we like." I'm all about, let's try to do stuff that takes that [exclusive focus on romance] out of the equation. When I say get rid of the chick flick, I mean that I want to eliminate guys saying: "I'm not going to see that, cause that's just about a bunch of women falling in love and getting their hair done." No! *The Heat* features these are two hilarious women, in the kind of a movie that you would watch anyway! But you are also not going to see them simply acting like men. I just want *people* to show up for *funny people* in a movie.

S2: It's these two kick-ass women doing their jobs, it's not about trying to find a boyfriend, which makes the love interests all the more fresh and funny. How did you come up for the concept for "the men in their lives"?

PF: Katie Dippold was inspired by *Running Scared*. There are the guys with the girls in the bikinis in the back. We were like, *The Heat* should be the women's version of that. Here are a bunch of guys who want to be with Mullins, and she's like, "You know what, it was just one night, get over it." Seeing Sandra and Melissa blowing off guys is hilarious.

S2: Is it written into Melissa's contract that her leading man must always be played by her husband, Ben Falcone, as retribution for her betrayal on the television sitcom *Mike and Molly?*

PF: Exactly, exactly. (LOL) Ben was one of my troupe of actors, before I even met Melissa. I cast him back in 2006, in a movie called *Unaccompanied Minors.* I have always loved Ben. When we met Melissa, and I learned she was married to Ben Falcone, I was like, "What?!" That's why I'm always the one to ask, "Ben, please be in the movie!" It just happened to work out that in *Bridesmaids,* Ben plays the love interest and in *The Heat,* he's cast aside by her.

S2: Will we get to see another collaboration between you and Kristen Wiig sometime soon?

PF: I hope, I hope. I keep trying. She's very busy. I love working with Kristen. She's my hero.

S2: Can we expect a future chapter of *The Heat?*

PF: More to come, hopefully … We came on tracking today [June 6], so it's the first day of "How are we doing?" And we are actually doing well! (Thank, God.) I know, it's crazy.

Images: Top: Director Paul Feig on the set of THE HEAT. Photo: Gemma LaMana – TM and © 2013 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. All Rights Reserved. Below: FBI Special Agent Sarah Ashburn (Sandra Bullock) explains and displays the magic properties of Spanx to her new partner, Boston Detective Shannon Mullins (Melissa McCarthy), in THE HEAT. Photo: Gemma La Mana – TM & © 2013 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. All Rights Reserved.

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