

Masterful Birdman soars triumphantly



By [Daniel Derksen](#)

12 Jan 2015

Take an extreme journey into the crazy mindscape of an actor in the masterful Birdman, an exceptional film by Mexican filmmaker Alejandro G Iñárritu, which showcases the craft of storytelling and the art of filmmaking.

Iñárritu's film vividly bursts to life from the first frame and is an overwhelming and entrancing experience until its powerful climax, with continuous camera work that intimately takes you through the labyrinth of spaces from the dressing room to the stage, constantly moving and twisting as Iñárritu's inventive story draws you deeper into its absorbing allure and breathtaking magic.

Michael Keaton is superb as Riggan Thomson, an actor who is famous for portraying an iconic superhero, and struggles to mount his first Broadway play, battling his ego as he desperately attempts to recover his family, his career, and himself.



Remarkable performances

Other remarkable performances from the excellent ensemble are delivered by Zach Galifianakis, as his best friend and producer, Edward Norton as a loose-cannon actor who is guaranteed to sell tickets and get the play a rave review no matter what, Emma Stone as his daughter and personal assistant who is fresh from rehab, and Naomi Watts as an actress with hopeful aspirations.

Iñárritu notes that elements of Riggan's story resonated with him, particularly the ephemeral nature of success and the question of relevance. "I was interested in exploring the battles with the ego, the idea that no matter how successful you

are, whether in money or recognition, it's always an illusion. It's temporary. When you are chasing the things you think you want and empower the people to validate you, when you finally get them, you soon find an impermanence in that joy."

"Riggan is profoundly human," Iñárritu says. "I saw him as a kind of Don Quixote, where the humour comes from the disparity and permanent dislocation of his solemn ambitions and the ignoble reality that surrounds him. Basically, it's the story of all of us. I love characters that are flawed, uncertain, driven by doubts and contradictions - which means everybody I know. Riggan's choices have been poor and this one has affected the people around him. Throughout his life, Riggan has confused love for admiration. And it's until he realised the irrelevance of the second one that he has to painfully start learning how to love himself and the others."

Keaton says of his character: "I just looked at Riggan as a person. However, being an actor - that's a job that requires a specific type of personality. It's already subject to extreme self-consciousness, ego, all that. And in this case, here's a guy who has all those qualities run amok, to say the least."



The line between reality and illusion

For Riggan's tortured ego, the line between reality and illusion is paper thin - and often not there at all. The shadow of Birdman - a constant, nagging companion - is always there, whether he likes it or not. "He embarks on a journey of validation. So it is a 'me' journey, the ego journey. And as he fights against his mediocrity, his ego - faithful friend and tormentor - repeat the patterns Riggan would like to leave behind and confronts him with his multiple limitations and delusional possibilities.

"There is something tragic, and something funny, and something very real, and also something very surreal about it," Iñárritu explains. "Birdman is Riggan's super ego, and from Birdman's perspective, Riggan has lost his mind by doing this play that is clearly beneath them. From Riggan's perspective, it's Birdman who has lost his mind. From the perspective of the era, both are irrelevant."



Like all of Iñárritu's films, (Babel, Amores Perros), Birdman takes an acute look at the human existence as seen through the characters, anchored by Riggan, but it walks a tonal tightrope between comedy and pathos, illusion and reality, allowing for multiple interpretations.

"I always said that after you turn 40, anything that doesn't really scare you isn't worth doing. And this scared me in a good way. It was new territory and I was definitely out of my comfort zone," Iñárritu says.

"It's always about the project, about the movie, about the story, about the people, about it being really heartfelt and really meaning something. This is as good as it gets from that perspective," says Keaton.

A universal longing

While the movie centres on the trials and tribulations of actors, Iñárritu sees their quest for gratification as a universal longing.

"The modern definition of accomplishment - people want to be famous immediately, not from a body of work developed over years. In one second, people have 800,000 likes or followers and for some that is achievement in itself - but it's delusional. The immediacy of social media can easily distort the reality of one person, especially Riggan, who has to fulfil expectations of what it is to be famous. And all this is new to him, that crossover is difficult. This is the story of a man trying to prove that he is more than that, more than the popular 'liked' guy. But in today's world, where irony is king, anybody who wants to be earnest or honest is crucified. It is an absurd, surreal world," Iñárritu explains. "In the end, I just tried to recount in a funny way the disasters of our human nature to reconcile, if not with the defects or faults of the world and our nature, with the way we approach and live them."

The play that Riggan mounts at the historic St James Theater is based on Raymond Carver's short story, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, and, of course, the mercurial search for love and acceptance is a thread woven throughout *Birdman*.

"Since adolescence I have been a big fan of Raymond Carver and this story is a classic. I chose it for *Birdman* because it was actually a very bad idea. I mean, I always try to think as the character and for somebody like Riggan, who does not belong to the theatre, to mount a play based on a short story of Raymond Carver is extremely challenging and almost absurd. I needed to have a play taking place and there was this incredible coincidence in terms of the themes of this short story. And Riggan looking to be loved and trying to figure out where that love comes from. I wanted to play with the idea that he was trying to project some of the elements of the play on to his own New York life. And little by little he becomes the character he is playing, that desperate guy, going into the motel room, asking to be loved. I was so lucky that Tess Gallagher, his widow, was generous enough to trust me to give me the rights to the story for this. I am very grateful," Iñárritu explains.

If ever you wanted to know what goes inside an actor's mind, or experience the world from an actor's point of view, *Birdman* is an ultimate ABC of what acting for film and theatre, and the world of drama involves.

Birdman is not a film you watch, it's one you experience, and one that will leave you emotionally and physically drained. It's a cinematic tour de force you simply cannot miss.

Read more about *Birdman* and other new films at www.writingstudio.co.za

ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

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