

WORDS MATT MUELLER

funny how?

From the team who brought you *Superbad* and *The Green Hornet* comes cancer-com *50/50*, one of the year's bravest, sweetest, FUNNIEST movies.

When it comes to cancer, Hollywood usually likes to stick it to women, afflicting them in their vibrant prime, then deep-sixing them while their bolshie best friend sings a schmaltzy ballad (*Beaches*) or their prickly mother puts in hard yards for an Oscar with a torrent of maudlin weeping (*Terms Of Endearment*). And if not women, it's billionaire crusties deciding to jump out of planes together (*The Bucket List*).

Which is why *50/50* is so bracingly, refreshingly different. Yes, it houses a weeping mother, a bolshie best friend and a pair of crusties (although they never get further than three feet from their chemo drips), but the disease is eating away at a cool twentysomething male whose story is true, funny and uplifting, and who doesn't end up being anybody's hero. What he is, though, is a thoroughly decent, charming dude diagnosed with a rare and malignant spinal tumour at the tender age of 26.

Will Reiser was working as a whippersnapper TV producer on the US version of *Da Ali G Show* when he met and befriended two of the show's writers, Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg. Unaware that cancer was taking hold of his body, his colleagues, led by "ringleader" Sacha Baron Cohen, mercilessly mocked him for looking so lousy every day. "Will was always really sick," recalls Rogen. "It was like *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* when those people were melting. He was just visibly unhealthy."

When Reiser later revealed his diagnosis and underwent surgery and treatment, Rogen was one of the few close friends who stuck by him – and when Reiser recovered, his loyal mate urged him to commit his experiences to a screenplay. The result is a comically insightful journey that strides the >>





No laughing matter:
Joseph Gordon-Levitt
and Seth Rogen with
writer and real life cancer
survivor Will Reiser.





Awkward best friends, overbearing parents and hot therapists: Seth Rogen, Anjelica Huston, Serge Houde and Anna Kendrick help Joseph Gordon-Levitt through his trauma.

emotional spectrum from grim to cathartic – not unlike Reiser's own battle with the disease. "It was difficult writing about some of the things I endured," he reveals. "When you go through something traumatic like that, you just want to forget about it. Cancer really sucks. It's not like *The Bucket List*. I didn't create a checklist of all these things

I wanted to do... in fact, our first title for the movie was *The Fuck-It List*."

Reiser's real-life experiences underwent a heavy dose of fictionalisation before ending up in a script which sent a slew of hip young Hollywood talents into a salivating frenzy. In reality, Reiser's cancer counsellor was 65; in *50/50*, she morphs into perky therapist Anna Kendrick; Will's mother isn't anywhere near as smothering as Anjelica Huston; there was no selfish, cheating girlfriend, as portrayed by Bryce Dallas Howard; and Rogen wasn't trying to get him laid every night with a series of illness-exploiting mercy fucks. "In retrospect, I wish he had!" chuckles Reiser.

But none of the truth-twisting detracts from the fact that *50/50* is rife with candour, not least in Rogen's awkward response to the situation. "Seth stuck by me during this time but he also didn't know how to deal with it," says Reiser. "He was an idiot sometimes; I was an idiot. We would laugh at the absurdity of it and say inappropriate things. We were always looking for the joke." A buddy comedy about cancer that delves the depths guys will sink to avoid voicing their feelings? That's as true as it gets.

Branding it "the cheapest movie we've ever made," Rogen says keeping the budget low – around \$8m – meant there was no pressure to water down the unpleasant aspects of the script. Not that they were without problems early on when James McAvoy – the original choice to play Reiser's alter ego Adam Lerner – had to leave just four days into the Vancouver shoot to witness the birth of his first child.

Up the proverbial creek, they had a week to find a replacement or risk being shut down. Joseph Gordon-Levitt's name surfaced almost immediately, Rogen phoned

'The whole experience was so dark and absurd and bizarre. Humour saved me' WILL REISER

him up, he read the script that day, and was in Vancouver having a pow-wow on Levine's apartment rooftop by nightfall. "We drank a few beers, talked for hours and decided it could work," says Rogen. Was there any weed on that rooftop? "There's a very good chance!" he laughs. "We gave Joe free rein. We really trusted him. We knew it was courageous for him to take on a role like this with almost no preparation."

Gordon-Levitt felt comfortable straight off the bat. "We made fast friends," he vouches. "The connection was quick and natural. We all have similar outlooks on life, we have similar senses of humour and, you know, it's a movie about your buddies, and we all still hang out." That instantaneous camaraderie shines through on screen, with palpable chemistry between Rogen as the boorish but big-hearted Kyle and Gordon-Levitt as his emotionally constipated, tumourous pal. The *Inception* star loved having Reiser on set too, "for feedback and technical medical things but also for philosophical things... without Will there, I would have been unsure of myself."

Gordon-Levitt wasn't the only last-ditch replacement. Nicole Holofcener (*Please Give*) originally held the directing reins, but she dropped out a few weeks before McAvoy, also for family reasons. Enter *The Wackness'* Jonathan

Levine, who had written a letter to Rogen and Goldberg a year before expressing a passionate desire to work with the duo. "I've been a fan since *Freaks And Geeks*, and Will's script was generating so much buzz," says Levine. "I wrote, 'I really respect what you guys are doing with comedy, not just because I'm also Jewish and own a bong, but

because you keep pushing yourselves.' Now I get to hang out with them – it's pretty cool."

Although this is the fourth Rogen/Goldberg pair-up after *Superbad*, *Pineapple Express* and *The Green Hornet*, the actor/writer/producer admits that luring in their target demographic – young guys with Xbox's and comic-book fetishes – will be a hefty challenge (and if the film's weak US opening is a taster, an even heftier one than they thought). But it would be a shame for fans of their stoner comedies to skip out: the Rogen-Goldberg formula of mashing up the sweet with the crude gets its most satisfying and mature workout yet in *50/50*, which was originally dubbed *I'm With Cancer* and went through months in an untitled twilight zone before finally settling on its split-the-odds moniker.

"The original title was easy for a creatively rambunctious person like myself to get behind but, being realistic, it was potentially repellent," demurs Rogen, emitting the braying laughter that often trails his sentences. "So our goal became, let's just think of a title that doesn't make people *not* want to see the movie!"

As for Reiser, he's been in remission for six years and confesses that however agonising and scary his experiences might have been, they loosened him up to an extraordinary degree.

He's now a far more relaxed and considerate human being. "Talking openly like this? It wouldn't have been possible before I got sick... the whole experience was so dark and absurd and bizarre. But humour was the thing that saved me through it all. I wanted to share that. I think it's OK to laugh at illness, and it's also OK to cry..." **TF**



I'm with cancer: Rogen draws on his own experience as writer Will Reiser's friend.

Anna Kendrick

Her chances of making Hollywood's A-list are better than 50/50...

I should have brought the robe!" hoots Anna Kendrick as she waltzes into a Toronto hotel suite for her tête-à-tête with *Total Film*. Explain yourself please, Ms. Kendrick. Turns out that in her previous interview, she decided to drape herself in a bathrobe she found in the bathroom for no reason other than "I wanted to feel like an old-time movie star, taking questions in her bathrobe." She left it behind, though, because "I don't know whose room that was and I don't want them to have to pay for it."

Considerate and considerably savvy, Kendrick keeps on proving that her Oscar nomination for *Up In The Air* was no fluke, that her sidekick role as Bella Swan's BFF in *The Twilight Saga* was never going to be the be-all-and-end-all of her career, and that she is one of the most naturally gifted and appealing actresses working today. This month's 50/50 is only going to add to the 26-year-old's burgeoning rep.

Her role as Joseph Gordon-Levitt's cancer counsellor is a corker. On the surface, she's another brisk, *Up In The Air*-style professional. But Kendrick adds a layer of vulnerable transparency to her immaculate comic precision as the inexperienced, try-too-hard therapist. "She gets really hung up on what she thinks a good therapist is supposed to be like – she thinks she's supposed to be Faye Dunaway in *The Thomas Crown Affair*," says the actress, adding, "I loved the tone, it feels like the comedy sneaks up on you. It's not like, 'I've got cancer!' – and here's a fart joke..."

Kendrick first met her late-arriving co-star literally 20 minutes before they were due to shoot their first scene together. "I was impressed with the connection Joe was able to create," she attests. "I've never really done a romantic role and I didn't realise how hard it was! Joe was good at making me feel like I really charmed him – when actually he's just a good actor. I thought, 'this is supposed to be the easy day – we're just being adorable, right?' But I felt spent afterwards, like I'd been filming some horrible crying scene all day." Gordon-Levitt was equally smitten: "Anna's got great comic timing," he enthuses, "and she's really hot too, which was nice to see because I don't think people think of her in that way."

Indeed, one of the biggest challenges Kendrick has faced since her breakout performance is the perception that she does one thing very, very well. "I get a lot of offers for uptight, ambitious, unfeeling girls and it's hard to say no sometimes because they're in really good movies," muses Kendrick, who just wrapped a role as Jake Gyllenhaal's wife in gritty cop drama *End Of Watch*. "I'm sure they would have been perfectly satisfied if I'd done something similar for *50/50*, but to me she felt like a mess. She totally knows that she doesn't know what she's doing..." MM

