



The real deal

In comedy-drama *Lars And The Real Girl*, Ryan Gosling dates a silicone sex doll. It's the most human relationship you'll see on screen this year...

After playing a borderline asshole in *Fracture* and a borderline drug casualty in *Half Nelson* last year, Ryan Gosling strikes out in 2008 with the most borderline character he's ever played: Lars Lindstrom, a socially dysfunctional husk of a man suffering from a personality disorder, who falls in love with a sex doll he orders off the internet. And, believe it or not, this charming, poignant indie contains not a single filthy frame in its reels.

"I totally related to Lars," says Gosling, without a hint of a smirk.



'She's heavy but very soft. And she has the cutest freckles'

"All of the things he struggles with are things I struggle with. They just manifest themselves in a less self-loathing way." In Lars' distorted mind, Bianca the sex doll is a shy, Brazilian-Danish wheelchair-bound missionary and he's involved in a chaste romance with her. "She's so beautiful,"

says the 27-year-old actor. "Heavy but also very soft. And she has the cutest little freckles." In fact, Gosling was so infatuated with his plastic co-star, he took her home at night to his mother's house (the film was shot outside Toronto, near where Gosling grew up). "The movie depended on our relationship so I felt a real bond with her in that. When they said, 'Action,' it was just her, so I grew to depend on her. I grew a real connection."

The film is set in a Capra-esque hamlet where Gosling's misfit lives with sympathy-challenged brother Paul Schneider and soft-hearted, pregnant sister-in-law Emily Mortimer. He's treated by townfolk like the child who still believes in Santa Claus rather than a man who needs immediate sectioning. If it sounds cutesy, it is. But the way Gosling and director Craig Gillespie walk the highwire between crafty yuks and genuine emotion is what turns *Lars* into an insightful tale of intimacy and acceptance rather than a Farrelly-style freak show.

"I would always quote Sidney Lumet from *Dog Day Afternoon*," says Gillespie. "You know the scene where Al Pacino's talking on the phone to Chris Sarandon, who's a transvestite that wants a sex change operation? Chris is standing in the barbershop surrounded by a bunch of New York cops... I remember Sidney Lumet saying, 'If anybody laughs during this scene, the movie's over.' We have about 10 of those moments."

Screenwriter Nancy Oliver hatched the idea for her unconventional romance when she stumbled across RealDoll.com, the website of a Californian company that sells life-size artificial females. Her script was snatched up by one of the Coen brothers' producers, John Cameron, who recruited Aussie-born commercials director Gillespie. Then... nothing. The duo spent years trying to get *Lars* off the ground. It wasn't until Gillespie landed his debut directing gig on Billy Bob Thornton flop *Mr Woodcock* ("I was too controlling; I set out to be much more collaborative on *Lars*...") that things finally snowballed, with *Lars* set up three weeks after *Woodcock* wrapped and Gosling signing on as soon as he read Oliver's script.

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GUYS AND DOLLS

All you need to know about ordering your own RealDoll



Abyss Creations, the makers of Bianca and her busty (mostly blonde) cohorts, have been servicing lonely men's needs since 1996. They create realistic, silicone-rubber love dolls with "articulated skeletons that allow for anatomically correct positioning".

The fabrication process involves stainless steel and PVC armatures crafted in a full-size body mould, which then has flesh-toned silicone poured in and left to set for two days.

With their flesh-like feel, every doll is custom created for each customer, with 10 body types and 17 faces to pick from, not to mention a choice of boob size (up to 32G) and fingernail colour.

After a cheap sex date? You'd be better off flying to Amsterdam, checking into a five-star hotel and hitting the red-light district. These are the Dom Perignon of the sex-doll universe: a basic model will set you back \$6,500 plus \$500 shipping. But you do get to keep the girl.

With lips parted and an anticipatory air, the standard female faces – Tami, Britney, Nika, Stacy et al – are interchangeable, allowing an old switcheroo should you get bored of Mai's Asian exoticism or Leah's creepy resemblance to Drew Barrymore.

Being silicone rubber, they can get a bit chilly and cold to the touch. The RealDoll folk recommend a warm bath to heat up their sultry creations. They're heat-resistant to over 300 degrees, and – handy, this – odourless and flavourless. Plus, there's "no risk of disease".

You can also order male sex replicants from RealDoll, complete with penis attachments ranging from an x-small 4 1/2 inches all the way up to 11, plus a flaccid add-on for quiet reposing.

If you're wondering what kind of saddo would form an attachment to a sex doll, track down *Guys And Dolls*, a Channel Five doc profiling RealDoll clients, including effete man-child Davecat, who lives with his doll in his parents' house.

So... was Craig Gillespie tempted to have a go on a RealDoll? Of course he was – but insists he refrained. "I asked the owner the same question and he was happy to say that he's tried out his products but I thought I'd leave that one alone."



Chop chop: Lars and Bianca share an awkward meal with the family.



Lip service: Lars 'chats' with Bianca; while (far left) Gosling talks with director Craig Gillespie.

out the old mould for the tranquil-looking Bianca he wanted.

"I left all that to Craig. I had a girlfriend at the time [Rachel McAdams] so I didn't think it was smart for me to be designing the perfect woman," chuckles Gosling, who didn't meet his silicone knockout until she was plonked next to him at the first script read-through.

"He dove right in," laughs Gillespie, who shot the film during the Canadian winter, partially in an abandoned town called Whitevale, once intended for demolition to make way for an airport. At first, Gosling spent the nights in his character's garage apartment – until he got freaked out being alone in the ghost town. "I got scared," he says. "One morning I woke up and there were two voices in my head talking to me. I was

terrified – until I realised it was two effects guys doing prep on the set." It was swiftly back to mum's after that.

Gillespie hails his star's devotion to play his courtship of Bianca with unswerving reality (Gosling devised every bit of interplay between the star-crossed lovers) as the reason the film doesn't collapse under its own whimsy. But embodying a painfully shy man who recoils from social contact had its own ramifications. "It wasn't one of those shoots where you go off to the pub every night," muses Mortimer. "There was a necessary distance between me and Paul [Schneider] on one hand and Ryan on the other. Ryan and I are good friends now, but we weren't hanging out with him at all on set. You just felt like it would ruin things."

Mortimer says she even became jealous of Bianca and her intimate relationship with Gosling and Gillespie. "She was just this thing that would sit in the corner of the room looking very pretty and she never spoke," says the Brit actress. "It was almost like her silence was rebuking in a way! I never bonded with her. I have to admit that by the end of it I was having to try to be nice to the doll."

And where did the doll end up? In a studio warehouse? In a skip? In a curious grip's horny clutches? Actually, she moved in lock, stock and barrel with both her star and director. "She's in my house right now," laughs Gillespie, who kept one of the two Biancas made for the shoot. "It made my sons uncomfortable to have her sitting in the living room, though, so she's in the guestroom now..."

Lars And The Real Girl opens on 21 March and is reviewed on page 58.

Some directors would have found the opportunities to indulge in smutty kink too tempting. But Gillespie and Gosling treated the film like they were making a Disney romcom, the garage-dwelling introvert wooing his inanimate wallflower with the respectful zeal of a devout Mormon. "We always went for the truth and sincerity of what he was going through, even if it made you feel like you're out on a limb," says Gillespie.

Cast and crew were told to treat Bianca with respect, not as the busty lust receptacle so many would take her for. She was treated like a real actress, "who I shot as if she had a no-nudity clause," says Gillespie. "We had to set the tone so Ryan could be in the right head-space; people couldn't be making jokes or doing stuff to her."

"Your instincts would be to stick cigarettes up her nose and make bad jokes and somehow humiliate the object in question," laughs Emily Mortimer, "but you just couldn't laugh at her in the way that you'd think you could. She had a sort of dignity to her that was rather intimidating."

It was Gillespie who journeyed down to the RealDoll factory outside San Diego to personally piece Bianca's creepily life-like parts together. "I found a book called *Still Lovers*, where a woman had photographed men with their dolls," says the affable Aussie. "There was one photograph that was so soulful. So I went back to the factory and said, 'This is the doll I'm looking for.' And the owner goes, 'Oh, we don't make her any more.' I said, 'Why not?' and he said, 'Well, her eyelids are at half-mast and we were getting a lot of complaints that she either looked bored or stoned.'" In the end, Gillespie convinced him to break