

Benjamin (15)

Directed by Simon Amstell



'18 UK 1hr 25mins

Fri 15 March for at least one week

Comedian and writer Simon Amstell brings us his hilarious and heartfelt feature debut about a young filmmaker thrown into emotional turmoil by a flourishing romance and the premiere of his second feature film.

Benjamin (Colin Morgan) is an awkward and insecure young man, desperate for approval but a minor disaster when it comes to the world of romance. His new film 'No Self' – an autobiographical picture about love and disconnection – is premiering at the London Film Festival, and he's more than a bit keen for the acclaim of the merciless audiences. As the nerves and anxiety surge, his publicist introduces him to an attractive French musician called Noah (Phénix Brossard) – a meeting that hurls him into an existential crisis.

Incredibly human and remarkably endearing, this is a film that comes from a place of honesty – Simon Amstell's own toe-curling experiences of love shine loudly, hilariously straddling the line between reality and the ridiculous. Comedian and writer Simon Amstell brings us his hilarious and heartfelt feature debut about a young filmmaker thrown into emotional turmoil by a flourishing romance and the premiere of his second feature film.

This interview by Euan Franklin with director Simon Amstell originally appeared on culturewhisper.com in March 2019.

Euan Franklin: Congratulations on the film. Are you proud of how it came together?

Simon Amstell: I suppose I am. I don't really think about being proud... maybe relieved! When we premiered it at the London Film Festival and everyone laughed and seemed to feel things during touching moments, it was a great relief that what I made connected to people. It meant that I wasn't insane to have thought it would be a good idea to make it.

Euan Franklin: Is there a lot of you in Benjamin?

Simon Amstell: I think he's probably me in my twenties. There may be some remnants of Benjamin still in me. He's suffering from anxiety, loneliness, and depression – and I think I've got over that stuff now. It's really a film about someone who's so defended that he's incapable of loving and being loved. All he knows how to do is seek love from an audience because he's actually terrified of intimacy. And I'm really into intimacy these days – I love it, I can't get enough of intimacy!

Euan Franklin: You've said before that you don't like to force your projects. You like to wait until something bubbles up.

Simon Amstell: That sounds like me.

Euan Franklin: How did Benjamin bubble up for you?

Simon Amstell: I'd just done a load of stand-up, and was a bit sick of doing stand-up, and so started writing about various relationships that I'd been in in my twenties. This film just came out of it. I didn't know at the time that it was going to be about somebody who was terrified of intimacy, but that seemed to be what the problem was with the character. I also didn't really know that it'd be a kind of romantic love story. I thought it was going to be more depressing, actually. But it turned out to have quite a happy ending.

Euan Franklin: You've said that doing stand-up was a kind of defence mechanism, and then you got tired of it. Do you think Benjamin was a similar thing?

Simon Amstell: Oh, it's not that I got sick of stand-up, it's just in that moment. I still do stand-up and like it. I think at some point there was a transition from feeling the need to do something because I didn't know what else I could do. Being funny was a panic button, and it was the only button I had really. Now I have it as a choice. I also feel like with stand-up and filmmaking, I'll probably never know how to do either of them.

Euan Franklin: We disagree – we think you're great at both of them!

Simon Amstell: Well, maybe I should say... I feel like I'll never learn everything there is to know about stand-up or filmmaking. So, I probably won't get bored as easily as I've got bored in the past. I think I'm working now from a place of pure joy. I think I'm just following my bliss.

Euan Franklin: Are you far happier now than you were in your twenties?

Simon Amstell: Yes, because it used to be about the results of the thing I was doing. Now it's about the thing I'm doing. That's so much better.

Euan Franklin: Benjamin is clearly struggling, with his film, between simply telling a story and profoundly telling a story. Is he confused about what he's trying to say?

Simon Amstell: Yeah, he doesn't know what he's trying to say. All he knows is that he wants people to say that the film is good. So he keeps throwing weird camera angles at it and a monk character who has no place being in the film. He's kind of lost any sense of purpose other than acclaim. That's why the film doesn't go very well for him.

Euan Franklin: His friend, Stephen, is intriguing. He's trying to be a stand-up. Do his experiences echo yours?

Simon Amstell: Yeah, I've had a few awkward gigs. When I first started, I was on the open-spot circuit for five years trying to figure out how to do it. Almost all the gigs were like that!

Euan Franklin: [referencing a scene in the film] Did anyone smash a glass at the wall?

Simon Amstell: No, thankfully that didn't happen! But everything else... that feeling of anger he has with the audience, I've had that in the past. It used to feel like a fight rather than a thing that I enjoyed doing that people enjoyed watching. Now it's such a joy to do stand-up because I remind myself that it's what I like to do. The people come to laugh. But at the beginning, and for Stephen, it's this struggle for validation and results in a lot of aggression – both from the audience and the comedian.

Euan Franklin: Is he similar to you in that there's a point where he just wants to pack it all in?

Simon Amstell: Yeah, that feeling of wanting to retire comes up quite a lot! It comes from when you're feeling tired, and you feel the things you're obliged to do are outweighing the things that bring you satisfaction. You forget why you're doing any of it. It's supposed to be enjoyable and fun. It's supposed to be an extension of being a child, playing. So when it becomes something other than that – career status, money, making people love you – then you feel like stopping doing it.

Euan Franklin: The performances in the film are so natural and lovely. Was it hard to cast?

Simon Amstell: Yeah, I was terrified of getting the casting wrong. I kept reading and hearing that 90% of filmmaking is casting. I also didn't want to see the acting, I wanted these authentic, natural performances. I really enjoyed Cassavetes' films like *A Woman Under the Influence* and *Opening Night*, where it just feels like you're watching something happening in real time. Not something that's been acted and then put together in an edit to make sense. I didn't want to smell any acting. Thankfully, the actors we cast are so naturally funny and brilliant and effortless.

Euan Franklin: With the film, we felt quite calm watching it. There's a niceness to it. Was the whole shoot a calm process?

Simon Amstell: Yeah, it was. I tried to create a set where the actors felt safe enough to be vulnerable and try stuff out. The worst thing for any kind of performance is tension. When you're asking actors to reveal who they are to you, you really have to create a calm, safe place for them to do that.

Euan Franklin: So no tense fights on set?

Simon Amstell: No fights, no!

Euan Franklin: You filmed at the Curzon cinema in Soho. Was that difficult to shoot?

Simon Amstell: It was quite difficult. They were lovely. I suppose we must've filmed when there were not that many people there. It was great filming in the Curzon Soho. The toilet is very specifically the Curzon Soho toilet! And it just felt appropriate, it felt like where [Benjamin] would have his premiere.

Euan Franklin: With the last scene, we cried watching it. There's something beautiful about the combination of music, and the colours, and the eye contact. Did it come together exactly how you imagined it?

Simon Amstell: It was slightly different in that I hadn't written the ending that's in the film. In the screenplay, I'd kept the ending a bit more mysterious. I tended to not shout 'Cut!' too soon when we finished scenes throughout the shoot. On this occasion, that was quite handy because Colin Morgan [who plays Benjamin] just kept acting and penned the ending of the film!

Euan Franklin: So he improvised it?

Simon Amstell: He improvised that ending. He just said what he felt [Benjamin] would say. And it was perfect because it was what the character needed to say at that point.

Euan Franklin: And there's that moment when Benjamin walks in, he's listening to music that relates to how he's feeling. Was that an original song?

Simon Amstell: Yeah. James Righton and I wrote the songs together. I wrote the lyrics and he wrote the melody. And he also did the score for the whole film. We sat in his basement writing those songs.

Euan Franklin: After this experience with Benjamin, are you encouraged to make more films?

Simon Amstell: I think I'll always want to do stand-up, I'll always want to make films. I don't really mind what the medium is, as long as I can be shooting something with some actors. I love writing because I get to figure out how to write the story that I think I want to tell. Also, I get to figure out what was wrong with me if it's a personal, revealing, honest story. And then I really love being on the set with actors and watching it come alive. That's really brilliant for me. I think I'll always want to do that.

Euan Franklin: Do you have anything in mind for the future?

Simon Amstell: I'm writing something, but at the moment it's not... I would say I've got the first third of something.

Euan Franklin: You're not going to reveal anything?

Simon Amstell: No, I'm waiting for it to reveal itself to me!

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