

MAKING OF

Funny peculiar

Mental illness, institutionalisation and American football are the ingredients for David O. Russell's comedy-drama follow-up to *The Fighter*. Prepare to be charmed and disarmed...

WORDS MATT MUELLER

After extracting his career from the doghouse with *The Fighter*, director David O. Russell has – what is referred to as – expanded horizons. An adaptation of the treasure-hunting videogame, *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, was dangled before his eyes, and looked likely. But instead the New York-born filmmaker of notorious reputation (more on that later) opted to dust off a script he'd written before he ever tackled *The Fighter*. The resulting indie romcom, *Silver Linings Playbook*, now has an awards-season bullseye on its back following a love-in at the Toronto

International Film Festival, where it snagged the coveted Audience Award (and where previous winners include gong magnets *Slumdog Millionaire* and *The King's Speech*).

More intimate, hilarious and crowd-pleasingly emotive than *The Fighter*, it shrewdly unites the crowd-drawing stars of the *The Hangover* and *The Hunger Games* franchises (Bradley Cooper and Jennifer Lawrence) as a pair of mentally-fragile lost souls, and wrangles Robert De Niro as Cooper's tweaky Pa into the mix, too. Not as easy a sell as that all-action shoot-'em-up then...

But Russell has form handling damaged, dysfunctional families – in *The Fighter* and *Flirting With Disaster* particularly – and his SLP characters come with labels: Cooper's Pat Solitano Jr. suffers from bipolar disorder; De Niro's Pat Sr. has OCD; and Lawrence's Tiffany might just be a little bit nympho. It was the late Sydney Pollack who handed him Russell Matthew Quick's 2008 black-comic novel, focusing on an unbalanced high-school teacher who moves in with his parents after a court-ordered stint in a mental institution. "I related to it so strongly because I'm the father of a child who has bipolar issues," reveals Russell. "Sydney said to me, 'This is going to be very difficult because it can be funny, but it's also emotional and intense. >>



SILVER LININGS PLAYBOOK



Every cloud...: (top) Tiffany (Jennifer Lawrence); (bottom) Pat Solitano (Bradley Cooper); (main) Cooper and Lawrence shoot a scene.



Serious moments: (main) De Niro and Jacki Weaver as Pat and Dolores Solitano; (inset) David O. Russell chats to Cooper and Lawrence.



I don't know how you're going to adapt it.' But I felt like I knew how to do it because I had lived it to some degree."

Russell was enraptured by the notion of specificity in the project: most of *SLP* takes place in the idiosyncratic suburb of Ridley Park in Philadelphia and is peopled by neurotics with quirky foibles as well as universal obsessions, like American football. Initially, Russell wanted his *Fighter* star Wahlberg to take the leading role, but when the latter couldn't strike a deal with The Weinstein Company, "I just felt I had to move ahead."

Enter Bradley Cooper, who Russell admired for his performance as 'Sack' Lodge in *Wedding Crashers*. "He was so palpably angry in that movie," says the director, "so I knew he had that intensity in him, and he told me how that anger was something he had hidden behind at that time. This was an opportunity to reintroduce Bradley as an actor." Cooper recalls his eagerness to do the same. "I don't delineate between comedy and drama the way others do," he tells *TF* with blue-eyed earnestness. "The real gift here is getting to work in a David O. Russell movie, not playing Pat Solitano."

As for the role of Tiffany, the spiky young widow who stalks Pat on his morning jogs and has acquired a reputation as an easy lay as a way to douse the grief of her husband's death, Russell was spoilt for choice after Anne Hathaway's *Dark Knight Rises* schedule took her out of the picture. Up against Rachel McAdams and Kirsten Dunst among others, Katniss herself swiped it with her 11th-hour Skype audition. "I wanted the film as soon as I heard the words 'David O. Russell'," says Lawrence. Lawrence's tender age – 21 when *SLP* was shot, opposite 37-year-old Cooper – didn't require any tinkering, insists Russell. "Everyone thought she was too young and didn't know what kind of chops she had, and she

turned out to be a knockout," says the awed filmmaker. "She made the movie sing."

With the cast in place, Russell shot *Silver Linings* over 33 days in a 'Philly' neighbourhood that happens to sit beside the one Cooper called home growing up. On set, there was to-ing and fro-ing about the right balance to strike with Pat Jr's psychological battles, so they weren't overly comedic or too heavy, except where they needed to be (after all, the character is consigned to an institution after viciously beating his estranged wife's lover). "I based it on people I knew who, depending on the situation, could go either way,"

'The set was an incredible place'

Bradley Cooper

explains Russell. "We did experiment with some Asperger's-style behaviour." The stronger Asperger's tics, however, were soon scaled back.

A tricky balance but it was fertile territory for Cooper: Pat behaves aggressively if provoked, says wildly inappropriate things and spars continually with De Niro. "Did I feel unsure of myself? Sure," Cooper admits. "That's the price of rice for doing this. The first day was the worst; by day three, I felt completely at ease and trusting in a way that I haven't in a very long time. A David O. Russell set is an incredible atmosphere for an actor. It feels like a sporting event, that's the best way I can describe it: you go to practice, you leave it all on the field, and then you sleep like a baby. After 33 days of that, you feel very satiated."

As for Lawrence, she confesses she had neither the time nor inclination to prepare much. "I didn't really research what it's like to have an entire neighbourhood think that you're a slut," she drawls with a twinkle in her eye. In one memorable sequence, Tiffany explodes at Pat Sr. but never mind winging it with her research, the actress claims she had no idea the scene opposite De Niro was coming up until the night before shooting. She showed up on set feeling, "barely prepared... but [*De Niro*] was so supportive. He's not intimidating, he's just very comforting." When called on to unleash the waterworks, did Lawrence become an emotional wreck in front of Big Bob? "No," she demurs. "When I do scenes like that, my body is shaking in between takes because of the adrenaline, but in my head I'm thinking, 'I wonder what craft services have for lunch today?'"

The easy, palpable chemistry with Cooper has garnered a wealth of critical praise. "I think that the key to having sexual chemistry on screen is having no sexual chemistry off screen," laughs Lawrence. "I love Bradley to death and we're great friends but, you know, we never... you do hear that sometimes chemistry goes as soon as things are happening in real life."

But the vibe all round was clearly one of mutual adoration. Post-*SLP*, Cooper and Lawrence went straight off to Prague to star in Susanna Bier's *Serena*, while Russell has cast Bradley in his next (untitled) movie as a federal agent alongside Christian Bale's financial con artist. It's starting to look like Wahlberg's loss that he couldn't make that deal with Harvey Weinstein. And following more than a decade of unpleasant headlines (Clooney showdowns on *Three Kings*, screaming at Lily Tomlin and naked direction on set of *I ♥ Huckabees*, according to a scathing profile in *The New York Times*), Russell has finally got his groove back – and can feel justly vindicated at his reinstatement to Hollywood's elite cadre of filmmakers.

"It's nice to know, when you have that humility and that gratitude, that you can do it like you mean it," he vouches. "That's a good feeling. I do feel like I'm in a zone..." **TF**

Silver Linings Playbook opens on 21 November and is reviewed on page 54. For more features, check out totalfilm.com