

# The AFI FEST Interview: BUSTERâ??S MAL HEART Director Sarah Adina Smith

## Description

Sarah Adina Smithâ??s sophomore feature is the story of Jonah, a man who has been split in two by grief â?? one who lives in the woods and another who is trapped at sea â?? with each incarnation looking for a reckoning with God. Actor Rami Malek delivers an exceptional performance, playing fractured parts of the same man and imbuing each persona with a wholly different performance. Kate Lyn Sheil and DJ Qualls round out the cast, as Jonahâ??s sensitive wife and a drifter who contributes to Jonahâ??s downward spiral, respectively. Director/writer Smith expertly crafts a darkly humorous and touching film that explores the nuances of the human condition with elements of conspiracy theory and quantum entanglement. BUSTERâ??S MAL HEART is a visceral, mind-bending mystery that will keep you pondering long after it turns your world upside down.

AFI spoke with Smith about the film.

**AFI: This film deals with some pretty complex ideas â?? identity fracturing, parallel realities. Talk about how the premise of this screenplay came to you.**

**Sarah Adina Smith:** The idea for BUSTERâ??S MAL HEART grew pretty naturally out of [my 2014 film] THE MIDNIGHT SWIM. Both movies propose a cosmology, seen through the eyes of a so-called â??insaneâ?• character.

Suppose that your soul is a traveler along the path of everything that ever was and everything that ever will be. THE MIDNIGHT SWIM shows us a character becoming conscious of that path.  BUSTERâ??S MAL HEART takes it one step farther, showing us a character who rebels against that path.

THE MIDNIGHT SWIM was about a woman who was never fully at peace with being born, who chooses a conscious death. Sheâ??s the psychological equivalent of an astronaut â?? boldly launching herself into the darkness, surrendering herself to fate with eyes open. She successfully achieves conscious reincarnation. Her journey is an illumination of the path of eternal recurrence â?? the ceaseless unfolding of space-time that churns out the magnificent picture show we call â??reality.â?•

BUSTERâ??S MAL HEART is about a character who feels in his bones that thereâ??s something essentially messed up about the great machine of the universe. The protagonist, Jonah, rebels against

God, or lack thereof. He refuses to be a player in a game where he didnâ??t create or consent to the rules. He was born with a bad heart; that was his Fate. But he found love â?? tangible love â?? through his wife and daughterâ?¦and refused to let go. BUSTERâ??S MAL HEART puts forth the idea that love can defy the laws of the universe. That love has the power to rip space-time a new one.

We are all in pursuit of peace. We want release from a cycle that has no end. Because Hell is real, kinda. Hell is the dark factory that processes energy and creates all the beautiful events in the world. I am grateful for Hell because here I am, enjoying these momentary glimpses of â??Heaven.â?• (The beautiful picture show of passing cataclysms.)

For the vast majority of eternity other than the tiny blip of our existence, we are the fuel that runs that factory. Our bodies are no different than the fire of every sun that was ever bornâ?¦all energy that ever materialized longs to escape.  We know for certain that we will die. That our bodies will become fuel for the great machine. The good news is that history repeats itself. The better news is that itâ??s never *fully* the same. Weâ??ll rise again from the muck and live another blip.

Jonah is a man who wants release from the whole comedy show. He wants to be truly free. But freedom doesnâ??t mean anything if youâ??re enclosed by a cage with no walls. It isnâ??t possible.  Busterâ??s heart cries out for a reckoning with God or gods or even just nature. He demands it. And he succeeds in calling that trial to session through the sheer power of his heart.



**AFI: Why did you choose the filmâ??s very specific setting â?? both in Montana and in the years leading up to the millennium?**

**SAS:** One half of Jonah charges up the mountain seeking a reckoning with his maker, but encounters only the void. The other half tries to escape a reckoning with his maker down south, and is washed to sea, forced into a conversation he doesnâ??t want to have.

I chose Montana because itâ??s the place where Americans go to find themselves in solitude and seek a conversation with the divine. We also shot in the ocean off the coast of Mexico. I specifically wanted to shoot in Mexico because itâ??s the place where (archetypically) Americans go to run away from their sins and avoid fate.

**AFI: How did Rami Malek come on board the project?**

**SAS:** Casting the lead role was the biggest challenge because I was set on casting a Latino actor for the role, which I had written to be bilingual in Spanish and English. My producers and financiers felt equally strongly that we should cast a native Spanish speaker. We spent about six months trying to find the right fit and kept striking out on availability. It finally became clear that if we were going to make the film in 2015, we needed to broaden our search.

But it was really important to me that we cast an actor of color in the role because the character Jonah feels like an outsider in an otherwise very white community. We made a new list and pretty quickly we all realized that Rami Malek was at the very top. This is before MR. ROBOT came out, so I had only seen his work in SHORT TERM 12 and THE PACIFIC, but I thought he was incredibly compelling.

Plus, I did a tarot card reading and the cards donâ??t lie. I canâ??t imagine anyone else playing the part. Ramiâ??s a disciplined craftsman and his own toughest critic. Heâ??s one of the hardest working, most inventive and gracious actors Iâ??ve ever met.

**AFI: You have a knack for casting great character actors in your films, like Beth Grant in THE MIDNIGHT SWIM and Toby Huss and Lin Shaye in BUSTERâ??S MAL HEART. How does that casting process work for you?**

**SAS:** Oh man, thank you for saying that. I really love casting. I had the great pleasure of working with the casting director Samy Burch on this movie and she brought so many beautiful ideas to the table.

Toby Huss had been on my radar from HALT AND CATCH FIRE. He has this natural charisma that I find very compelling â?? heâ??s playful and serious at the same time. Kind of a jester in the very best and most honorable sense of the word.

I believe it was my producer Travis Stevens who brought Lin Shaye to my attention. Linâ??s such a terrific fit for the role. Sheâ??s an extremely dedicated actress, fiercely intelligent and a truly wonderful person. In the moment of a scene, Lin is all heart, which is a joy to watch.

**AFI: Weâ??ve had the chance to watch you grow as a filmmaker. What lessons did you learn on [AFI FEST 2014 Breakthrough Award winner] THE MIDNIGHT SWIM that you carried over to BUSTERâ??S MAL HEART?**

**SAS:** THE MIDNIGHT SWIM taught me to trust my instincts, to stay open to surprises and to carry the heavy weight of a feature on my shoulders from start to finish.

I had a really hard moment in the middle of editing THE MIDNIGHT SWIM â?? kind of a heart of darkness. Because I had lived through it once, I knew it would likely come again on BUSTER. It did come, I was just more prepared to deal with it this time around. I learned to have more faith in the process and to release myself just a bit to fate, over which I have very little control.

*BUSTERâ??S MAL HEART screens at AFI FEST 2016 on Wednesday, November 16, as part of New Auteurs.*

**Category**

1. #AFI
2. #AFIFEST

3. Feature Film
4. Hollywood

**Tags**

1. Actor Rami Malek
2. Buster's Mal Heart
3. Cinema
4. Director
5. Film
6. Film Festival
7. Filmmaking
8. marketing
9. Programming
10. Sarah Adina Smith
11. writing

**Date Created**
November 14, 2016
**Author**
hollywoodglee