



**MADMAN**



# **RADICAL**

**DIRECTED BY CHRISTOPHER ZALLA**

**RUNNING TIME 127 Mins**

**RATED TBC**

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## **SYNOPSIS**

In a Mexican border town plagued by neglect, corruption, and violence, a frustrated teacher (Eugenio Derbez) tries a radical new method to break through his students' apathy and unlock their curiosity, their potential... and maybe even their genius. Based on a true story.

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

I needed a reset. As a filmmaker, I was burnt out and lost after finding myself too-deep into too many projects that didn't align with my tastes or goals; and as a parent, I had just endured two gruelling years in and out of hospitals after my only child had been born 2 months premature. So, we packed up our lives in New York City (my wife quit her job as a corporate lawyer) and moved sight-unseen to a lakeside perch on a cliff in Guatemala, our house reachable only by boat or mountain footpaths.

Our friends thought we were crazy, our families thought we were reckless, and our professional contacts thought we were committing career suicide.

Over the next years, I found time to rest, to write and began to rediscover my joy for filmmaking...an incubation that managed to produce a number of projects that I'm extremely proud of and excited to pursue in the near future. The only problem was that, in the film business, being current is everything, and I knew the few years of embraced personal exile was going to make it very difficult for me to capitalize on them. As much as I had chosen to take my career back into my own hands, I was going to need a chance to prove myself first.

In the meantime, the challenges with my son persisted. Due to his prematurity, he had some expected delays and learning differences. In our efforts to help him, we became extremely frustrated with the typical one-size-fits-all approach of modern educational pedagogy. I knew my son was bright and inquisitive, and yet the reports from schools and doctors that kept rolling in focused on his limitations, the ways in which he wasn't fitting the mold.

It's hard to understate how serendipitous it was, then, when Ben Odell approached me with Josh Davis' Wired magazine story of Sergio Juarez Correa and the powerful new teaching method he introduced to his students in Matamoros, Mexico. I have to admit I was initially sceptical of what I thought would be an all-too-familiar and saccharine story, given it's incredible, even hard-to-believe outcome, until Ben told me some of the things he'd learned from the substantial research he'd had commissioned of the real story. We had numerous, lengthy conversations about how we could approach the story. From the beginning we agreed that an unsentimental, realistic tone with a naturalistic yet unsparing visual approach would be the proper lens through which to tell it, but one particular detail caught me:

After increasingly failing to reach his students in each successive year, Sergio, the teacher at the centre of the story, had a nervous breakdown; desperate to find something that works, he stumbles upon a Ted Talk outlining a new kind of child-directed learning, and — with no experience or training — decides to implement it.

In other words, Sergio was winging it. And just like I had, he decided to hit the reset button on his life and take a new approach that would allow him to reconnect to his passion and purpose.

I found this, together with the actual methodology he employed, of letting the children decide what they would learn about, to be so vulnerable, so honest, so *naked*...that I knew it would be the heart of the film, and the principle around which it could be organized.

Just like Sergio strips himself of being the authority at the centre of the students' attention, I realized that the movie must also subvert the traditional "hero" paradigm, and its primary focus, at least as we enter the world, should be on the kids themselves, not the movie star.

And so filmically we start with the students and see the world through their eyes. The camera is observational, unsentimental, but we are also obstructed and at times neglected. We chose to initially antagonize the viewer, to overwhelm them with stimulus and information such that they become numb, even tune out - in the same way that the children of Matamoros must numb themselves to the litany of daily hardships they encounter.

The camera is four feet high, and our focus is a child's. Adults are of secondary concern (I often half-joked during production that our visual reference for the movie was Charlie Brown), until Sergio literally enters their frame. He's honest about his own ignorance and curiosity, a co-learner, an ally who meets them *at their level*. To some degree, he makes himself one of them. And once he enters that space and gets their attention, he commands it, they are riveted and, from then on, we are glued to his every move.

A film about teachers and students is not entirely new, but what so intrigued me about this project was the opportunity to try and tell it in a new way. One obvious aspect is the setting, and the fact that this type of story has never been told and *is* completely new in Mexico. Our exhaustive research there gave rise to tiny details of what Sergio and his students were up against in Matamoros in 2011 during the particularly brutal time when this story takes place: parents didn't leave their front doors without making sure the coast was clear; the nearby sound of gunshots or sights of bodies on the streets was common. And of course, throughout Meso-America, public education is simply not emphasized. The school day lasts a mere 4-5 hours, resources are scant, and school is often simply not seen as a place that will help improve one's station in life (in Guatemala, where I live, free public education lasts only until the 6th grade).

And while I revisited seminal works in the genre such as *Stand and Deliver*, *Dead Poet's Society*, and *Entre Les Murs*... I also noticed that none of these movies really allowed us to experience the actual duration of learning, the connection between teacher and student and the way in which that elusive "aha!" moment can come about and flourish. Capturing that process during one pivotal scene, which we shot over three days in a highly improvisational manner, is one of my proudest accomplishments. Yes, the headline of Sergio's factual story is the extraordinary success that he was able to achieve in such a short time. Instead, and much more compelling to me, was to witness how that lightning seed of learning strikes, and the human connection necessary to allow it to first spark.

Of course, to capture that spark we had to actually create it, which we could not have done without the incredible contribution from our ensemble of actors.

I had the opportunity to work with Eugenio Derbez before, on *Padre Nuestro*, which was my graduate thesis at Columbia's Graduate Film School. He was brought to that project by Ben Odell, who was my classmate there and also produced that film, which went on to win the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance in 2007. Ben is the most committed and courageous producer I've known, and as a member of my (very small) inner circle of trusted collaborators, someone who I would have jumped at the chance to work with again. I still remember Ben and Eugenio telling me on the red carpet at

Sundance that someday they would find a drama for us to do together. It only took them 11 years to call me! Ben and Eugenio were now partners at 3Pas Studios, and had optioned Producer Josh Davis' story from Wired Magazine. Although my phone had stopped ringing years earlier, my old friend Ben hadn't forgotten me. I was getting my chance. A rare, second chance.

Eugenio is the most generous actor I've ever worked with. He's a pro's pro. He doesn't have an ounce of diva to him and wants to do whatever necessary to nail the take. At the same time, he is so humble that I truly believe he doesn't know what he is capable of, how truly talented he is.

In his wildly accomplished history as a comic actor, Eugenio is used to transforming himself into other characters, physically first (what the great British actors call working from the outside-in), and so he found my urging to strip all of that away, to *not* seek refuge in some other character, but to lay himself bare — just as Sergio was doing with his students — to be truly frightening. After I told Eugenio that he wasn't going to be alone, that I was also going to be doing the exact same thing with a filmic approach that was new to me (an improvisational, non-story-boarded approach to the classroom scenes), and that my intention was to capture all of our thrilling fear and excitement and energy on the screen, he said "OK. I'll trust you. Let's do it."

Eugenio was also instrumental as a creative on-set producer, Whether it was making dialogue suggestions, adding a joke, or helping me rework something that wasn't feeling right or authentic, I found him to be an indispensable collaborator. No where was he more helpful, though, than with our child actors.

I could never have dreamed that we would have been blessed with such a dedicated and gifted group of kids. None of them had much if any acting experience, and many of them were taking the job to support their families. Because of Eugenio's super star status in Mexico, it was imperative that we keep his participation in the film under tight wraps, which we did, quite literally, up until the first scene that the children encounter Sergio in the movie.

I'll never forget the look on their faces when they walked into the room to see they were acting across from Eugenio Derbez - nor their shrieks of delight or tears when I called "cut" and formally introduced him. Of course they were in awe and incredibly motivated to work alongside a national treasure like Eugenio, but what was even more inspiring was to watch Eugenio relate to and befriend and mentor them. Watching them eagerly follow his lead, work long hours, and yet come alive so convincingly has been without a doubt the most rewarding professional experience of my life.

Many of our kids, just like Sergio's students in Matamoros, had a whole new universe they had never contemplated suddenly opened up to them. In so much of our world today, people, but especially kids, never get even one chance to show what they can do, what they can become. I'd like to think Radical shows how powerful, how profound the effects of giving people that first...or even second chance can be. It certainly taught me that I won't need a third one.

## CAST AND CREW BIOS

### Christopher Zalla – Director/Screenwriter

Christopher Zalla is an American film writer and director. His most recent project, *RADICAL*, stars Eugenio Derbez (*CODA, Instructions Not Included*) as a 6th grade teacher in Matamoros, Mexico, whose unconventional methodology effects shocking results. Mr. Derbez approached Mr. Zalla after appearing in his first feature film, *Sangre de Mi Sangre* (originally titled *Padre Nuestro*), which won the US Dramatic Grand Jury Prize at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival and was nominated for Best Screenplay and Best First Feature at the 2009 Independent Spirit Awards (where, he likes to point out, he lost to Woody Allen and Charlie Kaufmann). Mr. Zalla previously directed the television movie *Beautiful & Twisted*, a Sony/Lifetime production starring Rob Lowe, Paz Vega, and Candice Bergen. Mr. Zalla's television directing credits include *Law and Order*, *Law and Order: SVU*, and *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*. His film career began when he set up *Marching Powder*, an adaptation of the international best-seller, at Brad Pitt's Plan B entertainment. Mr. Zalla has lectured on screenwriting at Harvard University and taught as an adjunct Professor of Directing at Columbia University's Graduate Film School, where he received an MFA with Honors in Directing. Before Columbia, Mr. Zalla served as the Assistant to Cary Woods, the legendary independent Film Producer (*Scream, Swingers, Kids, Citizen Ruth*). Mr. Zalla's prior work experience includes: deckhand on a commercial salmon fishing boat in Bristol Bay Alaska for nine seasons through college and grad school; rough carpenter during high school in Kentucky; and growing and selling tomatoes door to door as a five year old in Michigan. He was born in Kisumu, Kenya, spent his formative years in Bolivia and Kentucky, and currently resides in Guatemala, where he has lived with his family since 2015.

### Eugenio Derbez – Actor/Producer

SAG and Emmy award winning actor Eugenio Derbez was born in Mexico City, Mexico. He is the son of legendary film and television actress, Sylvia Derbez, and began acting at the very young age of twelve. He holds degrees in film directing and in acting.

A star of both live-action and animated films, Derbez has been featured in a number of films that have brought his lifetime box-office gross to over 2.5 billion dollars, earning Derbez the global title of the most successful Latin actor at the box-office. Eugenio Derbez most recently starred in the Oscar-winning film *CODA* (AppleTV+) which won two Academy Awards including Best Picture and won him a SAG Award for Best Ensemble.

In 2013, Derbez wrote, produced, starred in, and directed *Instructions Not Included*. The film became the highest grossing Spanish-language film ever in the U.S. and the world, making \$100 million on a budget of only \$5 million. Derbez has also starred in hits like *How to Be a Latin Lover*, *Overboard*, *The Nutcracker and the Four Realms*, *Miracles from Heaven*, and *Dora and the Lost City of Gold*. Derbez has starred in two movies that have won the grand jury prize at Sundance, *CODA*, as well as *Sangre de Mi Sangre*.

Derbez has produced and starred in his own comedy shows for the last 25 years, with the highest ratings for a comedy on TV. His shows are still pulling in audiences through reruns in all of Latin America and in the U.S. through the Spanish language network, Univision.

With his production company, 3Pas Studios, Derbez has an exciting slate of both television and film projects set up on multiple platforms in English and Spanish. Recently, Derbez received an Emmy Award for his comedy show *LOL: Last One Laughing*, which he both produced and hosted. He is in his third season of the hit travel show *De Viaje Con Los Derbez* for Amazon. *LOL* and *De Viaje* are Amazon's two biggest shows in Latin America. He is in his second season of the Apple original comedy series, *Acapulco*, which he also produced and starred in.

In 2014, *Variety* recognized Derbez as the #1 most influential Hispanic male in the world. He is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

From his generation, he is considered to be the fourth most influential person on social media worldwide. He has close to 80 million followers across his social media platform.

### **Ben Odell – Producer**

Award winning TV and feature producer Ben Odell is Chief Executive Office of 3Pas Studios, co-founded with Eugenio Derbez. His movies have won the grand jury prize at Sundance, the Argentinean Academy Award and the Goya, Spain's Academy Award amongst others. He has been nominated for the Independent Spirit Awards and the Emmys.

He recently produced alongside Lin Manuel Miranda, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, which premiered at the Toronto Film Festival, based on the best-selling YA novel by Benjamin Alire Sáenz. He produced the Hulu original, *The Valet*, the MGM/Lionsgate movie *Overboard* with Derbez and Anna Farris and Eva Longoria and the Lionsgate movie *How to be a Latin Lover*, with Derbez, Salma Hayek, Kristin Bell and Rob Lowe.

Previously Odell was an award-winning independent producer whose dozens of credits include *Un Cuento Chino*, the top-grossing Argentinian film of 2011 and winner of both the Spanish Academy Award for best Latin American film and the Argentinean Academy Award for Best Picture. He also produced *Sangre de mi Sangre* which was the Grand Jury Prize Winner at the 2007 Sundance Festival and was nominated for two Independent Spirit Awards.

In television he serves as executive producer on Amazon's Emmy award winning *LOL* (now in its fifth season) Amazon's *De Viaje con Los Derbez* (now in its fourth season), and Apple's scripted comedy, *Acapulco* (now in its second season).

Odell spent his twenties living in Colombia, South America where he created and wrote over 300 hours of Spanish-language television, including some of the highest rated series of all time there. He also co-wrote the Colombian film, *Golpe de Estadio*, which was nominated for Spain's Academy Award and was Colombia's nomination for the Oscar in 1999 and remains one of the highest grossing local language movies of all time.

Odell earned his MFA in Film from Columbia University where in 2017 he was lauded the Andrew Sarris Award for outstanding alumni. He's a member of the Academy, the Producers' Guild of America and TV Academy.

### **Joshua Davis – Producer/Writer of Wired Magazine article film is based on**

Joshua Davis is a New York Times bestselling journalist, film producer and co-founder of Epic Magazine.

In 2001, Josh became part of the US Arm Wrestling Team after placing fourth out of four in the lightweight division at the National Arm Wrestling Finals. As a result, he was invited to join the US team at the World Championship in Poland (where he placed 17th out of 18 (the 18th guy didn't show up)). Josh has never won a competitive match, but he is now an internationally ranked arm-wrestler. The documentary film he directed about his experiences won Best Documentary at the Telluride Mountain Film Festival.

In 2003, Josh covered the Iraq war for Wired Magazine, where he was a Contributing Editor for nearly 20 years. He has tracked rumours of genetically modified cocaine behind rebel lines in Colombia, investigated the world's largest diamond heist, and hunted the source of a cyberwar in Russia. Josh's work has thrice been selected Best of Technology Writing by Yale University Press and has twice been anthologized in the Best American Science Writing. In 2014, he was nominated for a National Magazine Award.

In 2014, Farrar Strauss Giroux published Davis' book *Spare Parts*, a chronicle of the triumph of a small robotics team. The book was named one of the best new books by Amazon and the BBC. The book became a New York Times bestseller and was turned into the Lionsgate film starring George Lopez, Carlos Pena, Marisa Tomei, and Jamie Lee Curtis.

In 2013, Josh and Joshua Bearman formed EPIC, a magazine devoted to telling extraordinary true stories. In 2019, Davis and Bearman sold Epic to Vox Media and now oversee Epic's ongoing journalistic and film projects. Over the past 10 years, Josh and Bearman have sold over 50 articles to Hollywood and have adapted them as films and TV shows, including the award-winning Apple TV+ series *Little America*, the forthcoming Apple TV+ series *The Big Cigar*, and the 2022 Sundance hit *Breaking* starring John Boyega.

#### **Jennifer Trejo – Actor**

Thirteen-year-old Jennifer Trejo became interested in movies at an early age and began performing at the age of six. When she went to the movies as a young child, she was frequently curious about what went into making a movie. This interest led to early roles in films as an extra, and small speaking roles which she enjoyed immensely. She lives with her family in Mexico City where her hobbies include playing the guitar and the ukulele.

#### **Mia Fernanda Solis – Actor**

Mía Fernanda Solis began acting and singing at the age of four. She appeared in theatrical productions such as *The Little Mermaid*, *Los Locos Adams*, *Anita the Orphan*, *Peter Pan* and *Alice in Wonderland*. Taking singing lessons is something that Mia Fernanda enjoys, and she hopes to study acting in the future. Her hobbies include ice skating, singing, and reading, and her favourite subjects in school are math and history. Mía Fernanda is 12 years old and lives in Mexico City where she is in the 6th grade and receives excellent grades.

#### **Danilo Guardiola – Actor**

From a young age, Danilo Guardiola aspired to be like his favourite movie character: Peter Parker aka. Spiderman. Danilo is a calm kid, enthusiastic, and loves video games, so much that he streams content as well. He is currently 16 years old and in high school. He is enrolled in acting classes at SEMILLERO DE ACTORES in Monterrey, Mexico. *Radical* is his feature film debut. He is currently preparing for his second project.

STARRING  
**EUGENIO DERBEZ**  
**DANIEL Haddad**  
**GILBERTO BARRAZA**

INTRODUCING  
**JENNIFER TREJO**   **MIA FERNANDA**   **SOLISDANILO GUARDIOLA**

DIRECTOR | **CHRISTOPHER ZALLA**  
SCREENWRITER | **CHRISTOPHER ZALLA**  
PRODUCER | **BEN ODELL, EUGENIO DERBEZ, JOSHUA DAVIS**  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS | **JAVIER WILLIAMS, JOSH BEARMAN,**  
**AVELINO RODRIGUEZ, PATRICIA SANCHEZ**  
EDITOR | **EUGENIO RICHER**  
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY | **MATEO LONDOÑO**  
PRODUCTION DESIGNER | **JUAN SANTISO**  
COSTUME DESIGNER | **LUPITA PEKINPAH**