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Easier With Practice

A Forty Seconds Prods. presentation. (Sales: Lantern Lane Entertainment, Calabasas, Calif.) Produced by Cookie Carosella, Kyle Patrick Alvarez. Co-producer, David Melito. Directed, written by Kyle Patrick Alvarez, based on the article "What Are You Wearing?" by Davy Rothbart.

With: Brian Geraghty, Kel O'Neill, Marguerite Moreau, Jeanette Bronx, Jenna Gavigan, Kathryn Aselton, Eugene Byrd.

By [JUSTIN CHANG](#)

Amusingly predicated on the romantic possibilities of phone sex, "Easier With Practice" pushes past its titillating premise to become a quietly provocative love story about emotionally stunted manhood and the risks some guys will take to connect. Distinguished by a fine central performance from Brian Geraghty and a profound sensitivity to the awkwardness and alienation often felt by the ostensibly tougher sex, this perceptive, funny-sad character study reps a strong calling card for debuting writer-director Kyle Patrick Alvarez and merits a shot at Stateside theatrical play once it's finished roaming the fest circuit.

Inspired by Davy Rothbart's autobiographical GQ magazine article "What Are You Wearing?" "Easier With Practice" follows sensitive, nerdily handsome 28-year-old Davy Mitchell (Geraghty, "The Hurt Locker"), an aspiring writer with a slim volume of short stories to his credit. Winding his way through New Mexico on an ill-advised book tour with his younger, meaner brother Sean (Kel O'Neill), Davy finds himself alone in their motel room one night when he receives a phone call from a mysterious "Nicole," whose inviting, very accommodating voice more or less has him at hello.

In an impressively sustained long take that morphs from mundane to perplexing to hilariously awkward to dangerously erotic in a matter of minutes, Nicole leaves Davy satisfied but eager for more. And so begins a decidedly long-distance relationship, marked by frenzied interludes of loquacious lovemaking followed by tender postcoital bonding. Nicole proves eager to please sexually but more elusive emotionally, declining David's invitations to meet in person and never even giving him her number, instead initiating every call on a private line.

As his book tour runs its pathetic course, Davy finds it increasingly hard to hide the truth from Sean, whose glee in humiliating his brother goes beyond immature to borderline-sadistic. Things don't improve when the siblings return to their Midwestern hometown, as Davy's growing obsession with his fantasy girlfriend forestalls his connection with a lovely former flame (Marguerite Moreau).

Davy's presence in almost every scene has a calibrating effect, lending the film its quiet, intimate focus; even occasional scenes of group activity are lensed so as to accentuate the character's profound isolation even from close friends. Brave isn't too strong a word to describe Geraghty's performance, which requires the thesp to talk dirty and simulate masturbation (usually at the same time), all the while sustaining a level of self-delusion that risks turning off the unsympathetic viewer.

But Alvarez never lets his actor down, credibly and compassionately illuminating Davy's shame, vulnerability, social awkwardness and lack of sexual confidence, and subtly suggesting that this brand of wounded, tongue-tied masculinity is by no means unique. Offering terrific support are O'Neill, Moreau and Eugene Byrd in a small but pivotal role as a friend who identifies with Davy's misfit status.

"Easier With Practice" gathers momentum as it builds toward a possible meeting between Davy and Nicole; what transpires is surprising on a narrative level but proves entirely in keeping with Alvarez's thematic concerns. The deeply resonant finale leaves more questions than answers -- in some ways, it feels less like an end than a beginning -- and is all the more poignant for it.

David Morrison's Red-One digital lensing of Albuquerque locations provides a suitably drab palette. Pic relies somewhat too heavily on the narrative shorthand of the pop-scored montage, veering into the conventional romantic-comedy territory it otherwise so deftly sidesteps.

Camera (color, HD), David Morrison; editor, Fernando Collins; music supervisors, Marguerite Phillips, Colin Wyatt; production designer, Brooke Peters; art director, Gary Barbosa; supervising sound editor, Jeffrey Kaplan; assistant director, Michael Breines; casting, Nicole Arbusto, Joy Dickson. Reviewed at CineVegas Film Festival (Jackpot Premieres), June 12, 2009. (Also in Edinburgh Film Festival -- Rosebud.) Running time: 100 MIN.

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