

Still Breathing



DIRECTED BY: James F. Robinson

REVIEWED: 05-03-98

Ostensibly a romantic comedy with a light touch of magical realism, the little indie film that could, *Still Breathing*, received a huge word-of-mouth push when it made its worldwide premiere in March 1997 as the closing night feature at South by Southwest. Writer, director, and San Antonio native James F. Robinson received glowing praise for his work from not only local press but also such established outlets as *Variety* and others. Still, a distribution deal was not realized until later in the year when October Films (the prestigious arthouse distribution arm of Universal Pictures) became interested on the strength of star Brendan Fraser's immensely profitable performance in last summer's *George of the Jungle*. Then things really started to happen. Robinson has noted that even *Titanic*'s delirious turn at the box office may have helped his little indie - the notion that romance does indeed sell and that female viewers will make repeated trips to have their heartstrings tugged has never been more forcibly demonstrated to the studios and their acquisitions people than in the last few months of *Titanic* mania.

Far from the hue and cry of Cameron's landmark weepie, though, *Still Breathing* is a purely Texan romance (locations alternate between Los Angeles landmarks like the hallowed Formosa Cafe and San Antonio's rivers and missions) with a lyrical, poetic bent. Stars Fraser and Joanna Going inject some reality-based cynicism and passion into this quiet gem of a film, and supporting cast members such as Academy Award-winner Celeste Holm (*Gentleman's Agreement*), Ann Magnuson, and Lou Rawls flesh out one of the most achingly romantic films in years.

Still Breathing opens on Friday, May 1 in the select markets of Austin, Dallas/Ft. Worth, San Antonio, Nashville, and Portland, Oregon. While in Los Angeles recently, I spoke with Robinson about his film, the art of the deal, and the [Sundance](#) question, amongst other topics.

Austin Chronicle: After debuting at SXSW last year, how did you finally get the distribution deal from October?

James Robinson: I've been telling people that [producer] Marshall [Persinger] and I were like the wind-up dolls that hit a wall and then just turn around and keep going. It occurs to me now: Why didn't we think of giving up or just sending it off to video? I have no idea. Everyone turned us down over and over and over again. At SXSW, by the time we had the showing, all the acquisitions people had left and gone home, though that was a big high for us, and then nothing for a long time. We kept trying to go to film festivals - we've been in nine or 10 - and then *George of the Jungle* came out and turned out to be the biggest-grossing film Disney had last year, beating out *Con Air* and *Hercules*, which gave our film a huge boost.

AC: I didn't realize Brendan Fraser had that much draw.

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JR: Well, what happened was that kids were going, but women were going too. And the women were going back two or three times, and then the equation, Brendan Fraser = Sex Symbol + *Still Breathing* = Romance + Money, kind of went off in everybody's head, and there you go. We'd been telling that to the studio people for six months, but they have to think of it on their own or it doesn't count.

AC: So Brendan's pecs really made all the difference, huh?

JR: In a way, yeah. Post-SXSW, I had gone back to Universal which had just purchased October. I met up with this guy named Matt Wahl and Matt showed the film to some people who then became huge fans within the Universal monolith, and then *they* helped make the October deal happen. And so now Universal has the home video and the TV rights and so on. With a film like *Still Breathing*, what you have to do is find a person who believes in it so much that they can stand up in front of executives and say, "This is the one!" This woman Patty Jackson - who's part of the home video team over at October - did just that and chose to stand up for this film and say, "This means something to me." And she's very careful about what she gets behind because, being in acquisitions, she only has so many chits to expend.

Thank God that this has happened now. My mom died last year, and I was able to spend time with her during this big drought of the film not coming out, and we now have the perfect distributor, the perfect studio backing them, and the film coming out at the perfect time in history, and it just worked out so great. We're coming out right as *Titanic* is ebbing, while people have the idea of a romance in their minds. We're just very happy, because we were that close from coming out in just one theatre in New York and one in Los Angeles, and it's not really a New York/L.A.-type of movie.

AC: So did your screening at SXSW actually help things along any?

JR: We got a really great *Variety* review out of SXSW that was an enormous help, and Marshall and I got a tremendous emotional boost out of SXSW that kept us going probably all summer. And the screening was also probably one of the best days of my life, so I got that out of it, too. It was wonderful. If Harvey Weinstein had been there, or someone from October, we'd be in video right now, but they weren't. It was the closing-night feature, and a lot of people had already left town. But it was really valuable to us in a lot of personal ways.



photograph by Todd V. Wolfson

AC: Did you play Sundance as well?

JR: No, we didn't get in. I think that one thing we learned from that was that there are times when you get so angry and so jealous because other people are succeeding and you're not, but you've just got to remember that every dog has his day, and we're finally having ours. Other people's success has nothing to do with you. It really doesn't. There's some competition to get into Sundance and we were just so pissed off that we didn't get in. We tried, and in hindsight we probably wouldn't have even played very well there. We probably would have been in a crappy theatre with 300 people, and I don't think we could have lived off that as long as we needed to, whereas when we went to Austin, we had 1,500 people drinking beer and stomping their feet. We just lived off that for a long time.



Joanna Going and Brendan Frasier in *Still Breathing*

AC: You've set up a really cool website (<http://www.stillbreathing.com>) to showcase the film, and you did it long before you had any kind of distribution. Just how much of an impact has the site had on things?

JR: You know how an old lady will knit because she doesn't have anything else to do? The website was our knitting. This friend of mine created it and was always saying, "Hey, let's add this!," you know? We've really built up this rabid group of fans who are certainly going to go opening day, and I think it may help us a little there, but we don't really know the impact because we haven't really been out there, people have just sort of been stumbling on it.

AC: How did you come across the Formosa Cafe in Los Angeles? That figures in *Still Breathing* quite a bit, and it's begun popping up in other films since then, most notably *L.A. Confidential*. Was that a location you just stumbled across or did you have it in mind specifically?

JR: I'm a big "Old Hollywood" fan, and that's one of the few places you can go and kind of feel it, you know? You go in that building, and you really like it. Of course, at the time, it hadn't been shot before, as far as I know. But

you're right, L.A. Confidential ended up shooting right after we did, with the same actor [Paolo Seganti] in the same booth!

AC: Indies vs. studio: Would you call Still Breathing an independent film?

JR: Yeah, because it was made completely independently, with independent money, and no studio ever made any content-cutting suggestions. October said, "This is your movie," and that was it. It's very independent, and it wouldn't have gotten made in Hollywood - there's no bad guy. The conflict is inner, the heroine is prickly and hard to deal with, and you have to kind of get inside her to figure out what's happening. All that stuff would not have flown.

I'm such a neophyte in a lot of ways, and I kind of fly on my own little altitude. I hate to pontificate on the studio system, but I would say that making an independent film and getting it distributed is unbelievably hard these days. Studios complain about how hard it is for them, but it seems to me that everything about filmmaking, be it independent or studio-based, is tremendously hard, and making a film is an unlimited series of problem-solving situations. And often personality handling, as well. But for a debut feature like ours, I like to think everything came out really well after all.

--Marc Savlov

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