

APPLESAUCE

A FILM BY ONUR TUKEL

World Premiere
2015 Tribeca Film Festival

Press Notes
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LOGLINE

After he confesses the worst thing he's ever done to a radio talk show host, Ron Welz's past starts catching up to him and someone starts sending him body parts. Who is tormenting him? There are eight million people in New York City, and everyone's a suspect.

SYNOPSIS

Every Tuesday night, radio talk show host Stevie Bricks invites his listeners to call in and share their stories. And tonight, Ron Welz is ready to share his. But it doesn't take long for Ron's past to catch up with him. And when someone starts sending him body parts, his life begins to fall apart. Who is tormenting him? His insolent high school student? His best friend? His wife? There are eight million people in New York, and everyone's a suspect.

Take dark comedy, mix it with noir, add a dash of horror and stir in some melodrama, and you have the recipe for one of the most original and unusual movies of the year.

The Story Behind *Applesauce*, a Dark Comedy About Severed Limbs and Severed Relationships

Forget “stranger”—sometimes, reality is even *crazier* than fiction.

On paper, the premise behind Brooklyn-based filmmaker Onur Tükel’s latest comedy, *Applesauce*, sounds wildly absurd. A high school teacher named Ron (played by Tükel) calls into radio show host Stevie Bricks’ (the great character actor Dylan Baker) “Tell-All Tuesdays” segment to confess to the worst thing he’s ever done: in college, he accidentally severed a guy’s fingers. After finally coming clean, Ron starts receiving some extremely unpleasant gifts: dismembered human body parts. Ron doesn’t know who’d be sick enough to do send him another man’s cut-off limbs, but he’s determined to figure it out. Could it be his close friend Les (Max Casella), who’s suddenly angry at Ron over an unfortunate revelation? Or, perhaps, his disobedient student Rain (Zazie Beetz), who curses at him in class and has a too-coincidental family connection to bodily dismemberment? As the body parts keep showing up, Ron’s life begins to spiral out of control.

Yes, *Applesauce* is a comedy—a strange, unpredictable, and pitch-black one, at that.

And now here’s the truly crazy part: *Applesauce* is based on real events. Well, everything except for the whole body-parts-as-gifts subplot. “It happened to a friend of mine in college,” says Tükel, who both wrote and directed the film. “He accidentally severed a guy’s finger at a party we were attending. He was haunted by that story for years. Before I wrote the script, I got his blessing to use the story. We always talked about how it would make an interesting movie.”

Which, once you’ve seen the film, is one hell of an understatement.

Shot in merely 16 days in November and December of 2014, *Applesauce* is the latest journey into the odd, unique, and hilarious mind of one of the New York City independent film community’s most intriguing storytellers. Before making *Applesauce*, Tükel received the most attention of his career so far with *Summer of Blood*, a subversive horror-comedy that premiered at the 2014 Tribeca Film Festival; Tükel’s sixth feature film as a director, *Summer of Blood* earned rave reviews and made waves for how it quirkily reinvented the horror genre’s classic vampire lore. Prior to *Summer of Blood*, Tükel’s films bounced around from one genre to another, from the earlier vampire comedy *Drawing Blood* (1999) to the humorous, horror-free character study *Ding-a-ling-Less* (2001) to the zany Central-Park-set ensemble comedy *Richard’s Wedding* (2012).

Applesauce, however, skews closer to the darker sensibilities exhibited in *Summer of Blood*, blending the undeniably horror-minded trope of bloody limbs into a raw and audacious look at love, marriage, and how one's past mistakes can come back to haunt them. For all of the film's laughs, of which there are plenty, its underlying theme of regret is hard to miss. "The world would be a better place if we just contemplated our choices instead of acting on impulse," says Tukul. "If we empathized with others instead of doggedly pursuing our self-interests. And then you have honesty. Just admitting your mistakes, talking them through, fucking apologizing—that's the road to righteousness. Yet, history is a long, cracked highway of hubris and bluster. When I hear a politician say, 'No apologies,' it makes me want to fucking puke. I don't find any of this stuff funny, but mocking it, like I do with *Applesauce*, is a form of rebellion, I suppose."

Even though *Applesauce* is a comedy at heart, Tukul couldn't help but darken its mood at every turn during the script stage. It came from both his own inner demons and the need to make the film something broader than just another talky little NYC-set movie with humor.

Many of *Applesauce*'s funniest moments happen during otherwise normal, everyday conversations, like a dinner gathering with Ron, his wife, Nicki (played by Trieste Kelly Dunn), and their best friends, Les (Max Casella) and Kate (Jennifer Prediger), who, like Ron and Nicki, have been dating for years. One-liners fly, brutally funny insights surface, and the performances remain naturalistic. Although the film's looseness makes it seem like there's improv, *Applesauce* isn't just another anything-goes indie talk-fest. "My scripts are tight, but I like to play the dialogue very loose," says Tukul. "I don't like being labeled as a mumblecore director. My scripts aren't improvised. Every word is scripted and the actors prepare the dialogue. But in order to make the dialogue sound real, you have to take a sledgehammer to it. People don't speak in clean, unbroken sentences, so that's what I'm listening for when we're grinding out a scene."

Another key ingredient in *Applesauce* that separates it from other recent Brooklyn-set comedies—which, in the age of HBO's *Girls*, have favored free-flowing conversations over narrative momentum—is its underlying sense of the macabre. It's far from the average indie comedy—after all, there's a scene in which someone pulls a severed foot out of public laundromat's washing machine. Much of the film's genre attitude comes from one specific outlet: a novel titled *The Mailman*, written by acclaimed horror author Bentley Little. "*The Mailman* opened my mind up to lots of possibilities," says Tukul. "It's about a demonic mailman who mind-fucks everyone in town by manipulating their mail. It's filled with horrific imagery and suburban dread, body parts. I didn't love the book but it definitely had an effect on me." Right before Tukul's character in *Applesauce* discovers the second body part that's been sent to him, he's seen reading *The Mailman*. Says Tukul of the scene, "It's a little tribute."

Dread isn't the only storytelling wrinkle that makes *Applesauce*'s comedic edge

entertainingly peculiar. When he started writing the script, Tukul wanted to make a film with a “solid story structure—something happens, then something else happens, and then conflict, conflict, and conflict moving towards a resolution that’s hopefully unexpected.” To get a better sense of how such narrative momentum could be achieved, Tukul spent a year reading an endless string of noir fiction. He especially gravitated towards the work of novelist Lawrence Block, a prolific American crime writer who, among other credits, wrote the book that became the 2014 Liam Neeson movie *A Walk Among the Tombstones*. “Block is pretty fantastic—a very straightforward, lean writer,” says Tukul. “There isn’t a lot of description or long-winded self-indulgent bullshit that turns me off. It’s simple and to the point, but with a strong voice. He reminds me of Charles Bukowski.”

Horror novels and Lawrence Block’s fiction don’t seem like obvious inspirations for an eccentric little character-driven comedy, and Tukul knows that. For him, the thrill of filmmaking comes from defying an audience’s expectations, and with *Applesauce*, he’s made his most unclassifiable film yet. “Maybe the element of surprise has something to do with it,” says Tukul of his predilection towards combining other genres into his comedy. “Mixing up horror, comedy, drama, noir—you don’t know what’s coming next. Is it a joke? A scare? A body part? A clue?”

He credits the volleying genres and tones in his films, namely in *Applesauce*, to his own experiences as something of a hybrid himself. “I’m a Turkish-American from the South who now lives in Brooklyn,” he reasons. “Identity is tricky for everyone, but I’ve always had issues with it. Who am I? A Southerner? An American? An Arab? What do I stand for? What are my films about? I don’t know how to answer those questions. But comedy appeals to me. Horror, dread, paranoia, fear of death, uncertainty—those feelings command my every thought. Noir is fascinating because crime is fascinating. Crime is fascinating because someone has decided to subvert the law. New York is fascinating because, well, it’s New York. With *Applesauce*, mixing all those genres into a tangy sauce seemed like a good idea.”

BIOGRAPHIES

Writer/Director/Actor: Onur Tukel

Based in Brooklyn, New York, Onur Tukel has been writing, directing, and starring in independent films since 1997, when he made his directorial debut, *House of Pancakes*. As an actor, he's appeared in the genre-bending 2011 film *Septien*, the comedic faux documentary *Red Flag* (directed by and starring Alex Karpovsky of HBO's *Girls*), and the indie dramedy *Ping Pong Summer*, which premiered at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival.

With his left-of-center sense of humor and knack for mining humor from everyday situations, the Turkish-American writer-director's own films have touched on several genres, including horror-comedy in *Drawing Blood* (1999) and the 2014 Tribeca Film Festival sensation *Summer of Blood*. All of Tukel's genre-blending sensibilities are present in *Applesauce*, Tukel's seventh feature film as a director.

Actor: Trieste Kelly Dunn

Over the last few years, Trieste Kelly Dunn has established herself as one of Hollywood's most gifted on-the-rise actresses. Hailing from Utah, the versatile actress first impacted in Paul Greengrass' critically acclaimed *United 93* (2006), which led to bigger roles in well-received films like the 2010 SXSW Film Festival premiere *Cold Weather*. Dunn has also been constantly active in television, making appearances on the shows *Fringe* (Fox) and *Bored to Death* (HBO) before landing a major role on the hugely lauded Cinemax action-thriller series *Banshee*.

Actor: Max Casella

Having worked as a professional actor for the last 26 years, Max Casella is one of the industry's most reliable character actors. The Washington, D.C., native got his start on the hit TV series *Doogie Howser, M.D.*, in which he co-starred with Neil Patrick Harris from 1989-1993. In two decades since *Doogie Howser, M.D.*, Casella has worked with directors like Tim Burton (*Ed Wood*), George Clooney (*Leatherheads*), Spike Lee (*Oldboy*), Woody Allen (*Blue Jasmine*), and Joel and Ethan Coen (*Inside Llewyn Davis*). Equally accomplished on the small screen, Casella also played recurring roles on two of HBO's best original drama series, *The Sopranos* and *Boardwalk Empire*.

Actor: Jennifer Prediger

Since 2011, Jennifer Prediger has been a fixture within the independent film community. Her first role came in the 2011 drama *Uncle Kent*, written and directed by prolific indie filmmaker Joe Swanberg. Prediger also co-starred Hannah Fidell's *A Teacher*, a breakout at the 2013 SXSW Film Festival, and *Life of Crime*, the 2013 prequel to *Jackie Brown* starring Yasin "Mos Def" Bey, John Hawkes, and Jennifer Aniston. In 2015, and in addition to *Applesauce*, has several intriguing new films on deck, including Todd Rohal's sort-of-sequel to *Uncle Kent* and the Jason Schwartzman-led *7 Chinese Brothers*, both of which premiered at the 2015 SXSW Film Festival.

Actor: Dylan Baker

One of Hollywood's greatest character actors, Dylan Baker has worked alongside many of the film industry's biggest stars and delivered several unforgettable performances. Able to be an undeniable scene-stealer in both comedy and drama, Baker first turned critics' heads with his disturbing yet oddly endearing work in Todd Solondz's award-winning 1998 feature *Happiness*. Since then, Baker has acted for Darren Aronofsky (*Requiem for a Dream*), Sam Mendes (*Road to Perdition*, *Revolutionary Road*), and Sam Raimi (*Spider-Man 2*, *Spider-Man 3*), and in 2014 he portrayed the controversial J. Edgar Hoover in director Ava DuVernay's Oscar-nominated *Selma*.