

“The Skeleton Twins” director Craig Johnson on comedy, tragedy and Bill Hader

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excerpt

In this movie, there are so many traumatic things that happen to these people that it could have easily become manufactured or melodramatic. Instead, the tragedies felt real. How did you keep that from happening?

Yeah, totally. Well, there's two things: I think these tragic events create a domino-effect and one thing leads to another, and I think it doesn't feel like too much or feel like it's overwhelming you with melodrama because it just sort of parsed out incrementally, what happened and what went on.

I feel like the whole theme of the movie is dealing with dark shit with a sense of humor. That's how I get through dark stuff...I

laugh at things that scare me. My sister does, too. I have a sister who is two years younger than me and we're very very close and we connect with this weird off-beat sense of humor, and when we're going through dark times, that still can kind of connect us. And that was a major element to the movie, to explore the relationship between siblings who go through really dark stuff.

Comedy is often used as a way to talk about tragedy — something that comedians like Louis C.K. and Tig Notaro do so well, for example, and what made them so popular.

That's kind of what the movie's about, honestly. I think it works so well because people relate to it. Everyone deals with dark stuff in their lives. And I think that if you don't laugh in the face of darkness, you're just done for. To talk more just about the tone of the movie — the tightrope between the funny and the sad — I think that's just how life is. I wanted the movie to feel like real life and real life is never split into genres. It's never a tragedy and it's never a comedy; it's often both, sometimes in the same day, sometimes within the same argument with people. I love that. You bring up Louis C.K. and Tig Notaro, and I think that they're so effective because they give you a release mechanism. It's like, "It's okay now." It makes you able to deal with the darkness and the sadness because I'm going to talk about it in this funny way that rings true to people.

Did you have comedians in mind when you were writing the script?

I did! I don't know if I did when I was writing the script so much, but I when I really sort of think about casting I always gravitate towards comedians. I don't know why! I like comedians. I like funny people, and I also think funny people are smart, and I think often funny people are very honest and they take everything in,

including the sadness. It's a common thread through stand-up comedians and comedians that they struggle with a lot of sadness and depression and I think it's cause they're smart. There's a character in the movie, Kristen Wiig's character is married to Luke Wilson's character [Lance]. Luke Wilson is the opposite. He's really this sweet, honest, sincere, happy-go-lucky dude. He's maybe not the smartest tool in the shed, but he is just rockin' it through life, maybe because he's not a deep thinker.