

## **A SIMPLE FAVOR (2018)**

- September 18th, 2018
- 1 hr 57 mins
- \$X million (estimated)
- Directed by Paul Feig
- Written by Jessica Sharzer (screenplay by), Darcey Bell (Novel)
- Production company: BRON Studios, Feigco Entertainment
- Rated R for sexual content and language throughout, some graphic nude images, drug use and violence

## **QUICK THOUGHTS**

- Marisa Serafini
- Phil Svitek
- Demetri Panos

## **DEVELOPMENT**

- January 2016, it was announced that 20th Century Fox had bought the film rights to author Darcey Bell's novel *A Simple Favor* prior to the book's publication
  - The story had been pitched as being similar to *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train*
  - *Creative Artists Agency* represented the movie rights in the deal with Fox
- On July 26, 2017, Kendrick and Lively were confirmed for the lead roles
- "[A Simple Favor] was actually sent to my producing partner, Jessie Henderson, and me by the studio [Lionsgate] to produce. They basically called us and said, "You know, we have this script, we optioned the book. It's so crazy that we don't know if it's a comedy or if it's a drama." - Feig

## **WRITING** (Jessica Sharzer (screenplay by), Darcey Bell (Novel))

- "I can make this fun." It has a script that has so many twists and turns in a way that I probably couldn't have written from scratch, but I love thrillers so much that I was like, "This is my chance to do the thriller genre, but in the way that I like to do movies." -Feig
- "I wanted to have a more satisfying ending. Her book ends very cynically. I always want my movies to have, for lack of a better term, a happy ending. I never want to present a world where there is no hope, where the bad people win." -Feig
- "I also wanted to add a bunch more twists in the third act. [Screenwriter] Jessica Sharzer and I really had fun with twist upon twist. One of the other big changes Jessica made, before I even read the script, was that in the book Stephanie has a blog that's just written." -Feig
- "There have been so many of these twisting tales with unreliable narrators," Sharzer acknowledges, "but what I loved about Darcey's book is that it takes a different attitude. The book always has its tongue firmly planted in its cheek and that's what I most wanted to capture. I wanted the film to lean way into the genre, adding twist upon twist upon twist, but always doing it very consciously." -Sharzer

## **BOOK DIFFERENCES:**

- Stephanie, Emily and Sean share the narrative. Stephanie serves as a reliable narrator and a far more sympathetic protagonist for the film.
- Stephanie Ward in the book - Stephanie Smothers in the movie

- In the book - Emily is a nicer human being and doesn't curse.
- Sean is a successful investment banker- Now, he's a former writer turned English professor. In the book, Sean is in England visiting real estate investors for business. In the movie, his mother has a broken hip. If they had just left his career alone, her hip would have been *fine*.
- Dennis Nylon holds a press conference and sends a bunch of interns to put flyers up around Connecticut. And when she returns from the dead, he refers her to a helpful psychic.
- The prominent painting of Emily's nude body is replaced with a picture of a set of twins. It's just as symbolic, but isn't used to move the plot forward at all.
- Emily's twin is actually named Evelyn in the book. And while she is an addict, she doesn't have much of a sordid past. The pair never burn down their childhood home or kill their father. They never have a third sister. And there is no bible camp.
- Sean is in on the whole thing - totally in on the plan. He just doesn't know about the whole twin part of it.
- Emily actually records Stephanie admitting that Miles is the biological son of her half-brother. And then blackmails her with it. Girl has it rough.
- Emily kills an insurance agent who is asking too many questions and then forces Stephanie to help her drive his body and his car off the side of a cliff.
- Sean & Stephanie are framed for murder - Unlike the film - book Emily escapes with her son in tow. The two grab their fake passports before heading out of the US for some mommy and son bonding time.
- And Emily is almost nicer on the surface
- Emily specifically picks Stephanie to take care of Nicky
  - Bell's telling involves Emily loosely stalking Stephanie to see if she'd make a good temporary nanny and "fish" for her plotting
- The insurance payout is only \$2 million
- That steamy smooch between Kendrick and Lively never happens
- Stephanie has a super weird relationship with meat
  - Novel Stephanie became a vegetarian following her brother's and husband's car "accident." They had been on their way to pick up steaks to grill for dinner and Stephanie instantly associates meat with death.
  - Years later, when Stephanie moves in with Sean, she begins serving meat for dinner again. And that's goes totally fine. Right up until Nicky screams at her, "That's my mom. You killed her and cooked her." It's so horrifying and amazing. Anna Kendrick's face would have been *priceless*.
- Bernice figures out the whole twin thing way before Stephanie
  - An unsung hero of the *A Simple Favor* universe. Emily's mom's caretaker, Bernice (who is not an elderly gentleman running around with a shotgun and bucket hat, by the way) is an unabashed badass who puts together the possibility that the body found in the lake isn't Emily's way before Stephanie does
- Andrew Rannells character, Darren, doesn't exist
  - And that's really a shame. Because him hitting Emily with a Prius was kind of the highlight of my year!
- No one ever says "brother fucker" and there are no martinis in sight

## STORY/TOPICS

- Infidelity
- Twins
- Murder mystery
- Ghosts
- Film noir
- Unreliable narrator
- Unlikely hero: mommy blogger

## CAST:

### **ANNA KENDRICK** (Stephanie Smothers)

- "The character of Stephanie just made me laugh, because she's kind of a nerd. She started her own vlog, which I find very sweet. She's self-propelling, taking matters into her own hands even though it's not going very well. All the other parents make fun of her, because they think she's goofy and trying too hard. She's this very earnest person who's trying to do the right thing, but she's also carrying around this terrible secret of something she did that caused a lot of problems for people. So she's trying to cover that up by being positive, dressing really happy, being the perfect mom, being a perfect Martha Stewart-type person. That, to me, is just captivating." - Feig
- For Anna Kendrick, portraying Stephanie as she applies her sparkly attitude to the most sinister of human machinations was a one-of-a-kind balancing act that she relished. "This is a genre-bending story that has big comedy, a murder mystery, twists, turns and surprises. Stephanie is definitely one of the most optimistic characters I've ever played, but she also has a lot of blinders on-and those blinders get peeled off the hard way starting from the moment Emily disappears, which is part of the fun," Kendrick says.
- "Stephanie goes through the biggest transformation in this movie because she starts out as what we think is the perfect mom, but when she feels screwed over, that's when she starts to crack open and take on the best attributes of Emily-the drive, the ambition, the not-taking-no-for-an-answer. She becomes more skeptical of human nature and uses it to good effect. What I love in Anna's work is that, by the end of the movie, you really feel she has taken herself to a new place." -Feig
- "I knew I wanted Stephanie to dress very brightly," says the director. "She tries to cover up whatever inner turmoil she has with happy colors around her and she wears really fun clothes.
- Kendrick alone has 39 costume changes-but Kalfus especially enjoyed working with the pair.

### **BLAKE LIVELY** (Emily Nelson)

- "I said, 'I want in and I don't care what it is, and I don't care if he is asking me to do the catering, I want to be part of this movie,'" she said.
- The improv included a lot of swearing, which the habitually nice and polite Lively was not used to. "When I am on camera, I can say the words from here to kingdom come, but as soon as they called 'cut', we were like speaking in code about the words because we were flustered to say them in real life." -Lively
- "Well, I mean Blake doesn't even drink, is the funny thing. She doesn't touch alcohol... But no, Blake is such a perfectionist that she was like, "You gotta show me how to make this exactly" 'cause it's based on the Duke's martini as she mentions in the movie from

the London bar. And so I just kind of walked her through it and then she really embraced it.” - Feig

- **WARDROBE:**

- Emily's onscreen wardrobe signature was inspired by Savile Row-loving director Paul Feig's personal style. "We wanted to make it look intimidating; she played a very strong character," the film's costume designer Renee Ehrlich Kalfus
- "We actually had all these women in suits from the '30s and '40s — Katharine Hepburn, Lauren Bacall; Lauren Bacall is almost like [the epitome of] the branded icon. We looked at Madonna and we looked at men's suiting in lots and lots of movies." -Renée Ehrlich Kalfus
- Kalfus and Lively noticed that Feig always wears suits while shooting, no matter if he's by a lake or in a parking lot. "Blake and I looked at each other and said, 'Somebody's got to dress like Paul.' Once we headed down that path, it seemed so right that this would be a guarded person who nobody really gets to know. And she's so sexy and can walk and strut this look and be completely covered up." (In some scenes, she wears a suit jacket without anything underneath.)
- The goal was to create a memorable onscreen look. In their research, the duo looked at famous gender-bending looks from Diane Keaton in *Annie Hall*

#### **HENRY GOLDING** (Sean Townsend)

- "I really wanted to have an inclusive cast for this movie. My wife has been a big fan of the *Crazy Rich Asian* books; she knew that they were making a movie and had read that they discovered this guy Henry Golding from this worldwide casting search. She said, "You should look that guy up."
- "I just fell in love with the guy, because he's just so charming and likable—and handsome as anything." -Feig
- "I skyped with Henry, he did an audition that he taped of himself, then we flew him in to audition with Blake Lively a couple times and do a chemistry read. He's just the greatest—I could not love this guy more. He's so talented, and one of the nicest people you've ever met in your life." -Feig
- "I have heard people call him the new Cary Grant, which I think is a nice way to capture him because he has a bit of old Hollywood elegance." -Lively
- "When we screen-tested with him, Paul wasn't looking for any specific type, he just wanted the best person for the role - someone who could believably be with both these women because our characters could not be more different." - Lively
- "I was fascinated by the shifting dynamics between the three and how that changes drastically at times in the course of the story," he says. "I was also fascinated by Sean as this struggling author who finds a new lease on life when his wife goes missing." -Golding

#### **LINDA CARDELLINI** (Diana Hyland)

- Starre in Feig's first TV series *Freaks and Geeks*
- "We hadn't had the chance to work together for 17 years. She's such a great actress and this character is so not Lindsay from 'Freaks and Geeks,' so it was fun to watch her become someone dark and unpredictable. We had such a good time, and she will always be my hero." -Feig

- "Diana's whole life crumbled because of Emily and so when she hears about her again it is like being haunted by a ghost. She goes through a whole range of emotions in a tiny, short period of time," she describes."- Cardellini

#### **REST OF CAST:**

- Andrew Rannells as Darren
- Ian Ho as Nicky Townsend-Nelson
- Joshua Satine as Miles Smothers
- Rupert Friend as Dennis Nylon
- Jean Smart as Margaret McLanden
- Eric Johnson as Davis
- Glenda Braganza as Kerry Glenda
- Kelly McCormack as Stacy
- Aparna Nancherla as Sona
- Dustin Milligan as Chris
- Danielle Bourgon as Grace Smothers
- Gia Sandhu as Valerie
- Paul Jurewicz as Bobby Chelkowsky
- Sarah Baker as Maryanne Chelkowsky
- Bashir Salahuddin as Detective Summerville

#### **DIRECTING:** (Paul Feig)

- "I read [the script] and I went "You know what? I like it so much I actually want to direct it."
- "Paul creates a very, very safe environment, he makes you feel like you can't do anything wrong. And so I think that is really nice for Henry to be on a set like that, because they are not all like that." - Lively
- "It was really nice to be working in a lower budget level for this one, I have to say. But I like doing both. I like doing the big ones and I like doing the small ones."

#### **TRIVIA**

- The gin used in the martinis shared by Anna and Blake's characters is Aviation (American) Gin, a company owned by Blake Lively's husband, Ryan Reynolds.

#### **PRODUCTION/CINEMATOGRAPHY** (John Schwartzman)

- *A Simple Favor* commenced principal production on August 14, 2017, in Toronto, Ontario, Canada
- Feig knew he wanted to riff on the idea of a 21st century suburban noir-and to starkly contrast the beauty and lightness of the film's visual design with the ceaselessly turbulent turns of Stephanie and Emily's story.
- Academy Award -nominated director of photography.
- A film school classmate of Feig's, and a long-time friend, Schwartzman thoroughly enjoyed their first creative collaboration.
- Schwartzman latched onto David Lynch's 1980s neo-noir *Blue Velvet* as a guidepost. "I was interested in the brightly lit, poppy colors of that film and I used it as an inspiration," says the cinematographer. "The idea was to not try to hide things in the shadows on this

movie. Let's put it all out there in plain sight and let the audience figure out all the information."

- "Emily's house had to be pristine and high-end. It's all about empty spaces and voids and big open windows with just the right the play of light." "The house we ultimately found had this amazing concrete floor that allowed us to really roll the cameras everywhere," explains Feig. "And it had a lot of room, which was important because John Schwartzman's is the king of moving the camera."
- McLanden's dilapidated mansion, shot on the vast, eerie grounds of a wealthy Canadian entrepreneur's former estate. "That set was so fun to create because Mrs. McLanden was rich, but then the bottom fell out, so we wanted a sense of grandeur and money that has turned into a bunch of collected junk. It's funny, yet scary, and you get a sense of something lost."
- age's creation of Dennis Nylon's gallery-like offices, which he built from scratch in an empty warehouse, was the most astonishing.

### **EDITING/VFX** (Brent White)

- "Maybe it stretched some muscles, but it was more about: "How do I keep the tension going so that you're drawn into this world and then drawn along this journey?" Just kind of being on a single journey where you go from here to here and this creates a kind of tension where I get a little bit more information from this scene. I'm super happy with how the movie turned out."
- "It becomes so much a part of what Anna Kendrick does as a performer in the movie, because she's the person that we see things through so you have to make the movie work where the audience is really in her headspace, so that you feel the things that she feels. That was an interesting thing — to be so focused on a single character in a way that usually I'm not because I'm working with an ensemble. But once Anna Kendrick and Blake Lively are in a scene together, that's just gold. That's the magic. Those two characters in the same room is so fun." (talking about his approach when editing.)

### **SOUND/MUSIC** (Theodore Shapiro)

- A Simple Favor consists of 17 credited songs, from artists including Brigitte Bardot, Serge Gainsborough, Cyprus Hill, Françoise Hardy and ZAZ.
- A Simple Favor soundtrack consists of 26 tracks, composed by Theodore Shapiro.

### **PROMOTION**

- "Please, we cannot market this as a comedy. If we're saying this is a comedy, it's not funny." -Feig
- May 1, 2018, Blake Lively deleted/hid all pictures from her Instagram account in order to promote the film.
- September 10, 2018- Blake Lively and Anna Kendrick post videos on Instagram to show "it's not what you think" to promote the film.
- At premiere, Blake Lively joked about meeting her mother for the first time

### **BOX OFFICE**

- (As of Sept 19th, 2018)
- Domestic: \$ 20,917,167
- Foreign: \$ 3,596,805
- Worldwide: \$ 24,513,972

- In the United States and Canada, *A Simple Favor* was released alongside *White Boy Rick*, *Unbroken: Path to Redemption* and *The Predator*, and was projected to gross \$12–15 million from 3,102 theaters in its opening weekend
- It made \$5.9 million on its first day (including \$900,000 from Thursday night previews) and \$16.1 million over the weekend, finishing third behind *The Predator* and *The Nun*

## RECEPTION

- Rotten Tomatoes: 83% Tatometer, 84% Audience
- The site's critical consensus reads, "Twisty, twisted, and above all simply fun, *A Simple Favor* casts a stylish mommy noir spell strengthened by potent performances from Anna Kendrick and Blake Lively."
- Cinemascore: B+
- IMDb: 7.3/10

## SEQUELS/LEGACY