

The Skeleton Twins - one of the best films of the year

 By [Daniel Derksen](#)

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If there's a brother and sister you will never forget, it's The Skeleton Twins in Craig Johnson's profoundly stirring film about life, love and things that really matter. If ever you felt lost, don't be afraid to lose yourself in this remarkable film that is undoubtedly one of the best must-see films of the year, telling the unforgettable story of Maggie and Milo Dean.

Melancholic Milo (Bill Hader), a frustrated actor and gay man with no prospects, decides to accept his sister's offer to return to their home town in bucolic upstate New York. However, he's unaware that Maggie (Kristen Wiig) is barely holding it together and is secretly unhappy despite her loving husband Lance (Luke Wilson).

"The Skeleton Twins is about a brother and sister and their strange, messy, beautiful, funny, volatile relationship. At its core, it's a love story: Maggie and Milo meet essentially as strangers and then discover, or, in this case, rediscover their love for each other," says Johnson.



Painful wounds

With painful wounds that only the other can understand, Milo and Maggie grow closer as they try to guide each other through this newest set of secrets. But as the hurt from the past catches up to the confusion of the present, their special bond is put to the test once again. They bring out not only the best in each other, but also the worst, and they are each desperate to avoid owning up to their own mistakes. Eventually, Milo and Maggie grow to understand that living truthfully and sharing their lives with each other, pain and all, is the only way they can move forward and reclaim the happiness they once enjoyed together.

Poet Maya Angelou writes: "I don't believe accident of birth makes people sisters or brothers. Sisterhood and brotherhood is a condition people have to work at."

That's definitely the case for twins Milo and Maggie Dean. After a decade of not talking to each other, circumstances bring them back together in a poignant and painfully funny drama that director and co-writer Craig Johnson calls 'a love story between a brother and a sister'. The *Skeleton Twins* delicately balances two lifetimes of pain, regret, and loss with a buoyant and joyful celebration of two people rediscovering themselves and each other just at the right time.

"Maggie and Milo are damaged, prickly, sardonic, and self-obsessed," says Johnson, "but they are also passionate, generous, hopeful, and full of love. And, most of all, they're funny. The moment we are about to judge them, they come through with acts of grace and humour that disarm us - and remind us not only of our own brothers and sisters, but of ourselves. We're all struggling against life in our own ways, and if you can't face the darkness and chuckle, you're done for."

Powerful dramatic performances

The film also features magnificent eye-opening and powerful dramatic performances from several actors better known for their comedic abilities.

Inspired by the witty and emotionally resonant real-life dramas of filmmakers like Alexander Payne, Lisa Cholodenko, and Noah Baumbach, Johnson and co-writer Mark Heyman succeeded in their desire to tell a story that would make audiences both laugh and cry while identifying with familiar and flawed characters.

The germ of the screenplay would come from Heyman's suggestion to revisit an incident from his own teenage life in New Mexico, when one of his peers is alleged to have had a relationship with a teacher. "It was clearly inappropriate," Heyman remembers, "but the student was almost 18 and the teacher was very young, so it was just on the edge of 'almost acceptable'," he says, explaining how he thought the situation might make for a compelling back story.

The idea quickly resonated with Johnson, whose parents had both worked as teachers. But in order to flesh out the situation, they needed more. "We came up with the idea that there had been a sibling who interfered in the relationship," says Johnson. "Eventually, we realised we were more interested in that brother-sister relationship, and the affair with the teacher became secondary."



Strong comedic instincts

Hader knew that the screenplay required actors with strong comedic instincts - there are scenes in which Milo tries to cheer up his sister with an elaborately choreographed lip-synch, a scene you will never forget, and a truly hilarious moment where they crack each other up while huffing nitrous oxide at the office where Maggie works as a dental hygienist.

But the opportunity to frame those funnier moments in the context of two family members going through so much emotional turmoil was what really attracted him to the project.

"No one knows more about you than your siblings, and Milo and Maggie have this great tragedy together," says Hader, who admits that he drew upon the character's emotional life from his own close relationship to two sisters.

Knowing how easily the story's balance of serious drama and hopeful comedy could be disrupted, Johnson and the film's producing team rounded out the cast with several actors who are known as powerhouses in the comedy world.

"I find that comic actors are able to transition to drama much easier than dramatic actors can do comedy," says Johnson.

"Some of my favourite movies are the ones where comedic actors are re-contextualised, like Adam Sandler in *Punch Drunk Love* or Jim Carrey in *The Truman Show*."



Strong writing abilities

Their search for an actor to play the complicated role of Maggie ended with Kristen Wiig, one of the industry's most in-demand actresses due to her brilliant instincts, comic precision, and strong writing abilities.

Despite their tenure together on SNL, Wiig and Hader still managed to surprise each other on set. "It has been a dream - Bill and I had been working together for seven years, but this film is so completely different, and I've seen a side of him I've never really seen," says Wiig. "Before we did this we were very close. I always considered him like a brother, so being able to play these two complicated people has been very rewarding."

Hader, for his part, thinks the same of Wiig. "Working with Kristen, she just makes you better," Hader says. "It's just not fair how talented she is. We've known each other for years so once she was cast, we didn't have to do too much - that nitrous oxide scene, embarrassingly, is pretty much how Kristen and I are around each other all the time. She's essentially my sister. But just watching her work, it's amazing that I've known her for so long and she can still do things that surprise me. I will watch her and say: 'Wow, you can do that? I thought I knew all your moves, and I don't!'"

"What interested me most about this story were the small ways in which brothers and sisters interact, reflect each other and connect - specifically through humour," says Johnson. "I am very close to my sister and, even though we are wildly different people, we share an offbeat sense of humour. My sister can make me laugh in almost any situation, light or dark, and I wanted that sensibility to infuse Maggie and Milo's relationship. More than their common history, more than the mutual feeling that they've screwed up their lives, more than their shared taste in 80s music, it is their ability to crack each other up, often in the face of tragic circumstances, that bonds them together."

The chemistry between Wiig and Hader was crucial for Johnson, who is very close to his own sister. "My sister isn't that much different from Kristen Wiig in terms of temperament or sense of humour, and we've always connected through our

very strange, shared sense of humour. I think that's become one of the most present elements of the movie, how a brother and sister can connect through humour. Bill and Kristen are such dear friends in real life that they have a brother-sister type relationship, and that's not something a director can manufacture."

Own sensibilities and interpretations

While Johnson believes in sticking closely to a script, casting performers with strong comedic backgrounds allowed him to give them room to bring their own sensibilities and interpretations to the dialogue.

"Even in scenes where I wanted them to do the script very much as written, I'd always want them to riff on the lines, to embellish them, to throw in their own stuff, because it makes the movie feel more authentic and natural - and much, much funnier," he says.

Perhaps no one exemplifies this more in *The Skeleton Twins* than Luke Wilson, who chose to play the part of Maggie's husband Lance like 'a Labrador retriever - upbeat, friendly, you can yell at him and two minutes later he's forgotten that you're mad'. Lance's presence is largely humorous counterpoint in the story - his exuberant love of life, food, and his wife seem almost ridiculously naïve given the tragedy shared by the other characters.

But Wilson appreciates the important part Lance plays in the twins' difficult journey. "Lance is smart enough to know that he's lucky to be with Maggie, but not quite sharp enough to know that he's not giving her what she needs. He's smart enough to know that Maggie and Milo have a deep bond, but that they are totally different people from the kind he's used to."

We really need more films like *The Skeleton Twins* to remind us of how important it is to connect and communicate with those we love and share our lives with.

It's through their journey that we can truly reconnect with what we have lost on our journey through life and celebrate unique friendships and relationships. It definitely gets my vote as one of the best films of the year.

Read more about *The Skeleton Twins* and other new films opening this week at www.writingstudio.co.za

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