



PREVIEW

Beau Is Afraid

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Directed by: Ari Aster

Production Company: A24

Executive Producers: Len Blavatnik, Danny Cohen, Timo Argillander, Elisa Alvares, Ann Ruark

Produced by: Lars Knudsen, Ari Aster

Co-producers: Luca Borghese, Tyler Campellone

Casting by: Jim Carnahan

Written by: Ari Aster

Director of Photography: Pawel Pogorzelski

Editor: Lucian Johnston

Visual Effects Supervisor: Louis Morin

Visual Effects Producer: Annie Godin

Animation by: Cristóbal León, Joaquín Cociña

Animation Sequence Produced by:

Jorge Cañada Escorihuela

Production Designer: Fiona Crombie

Costume Designer: Alice Babidge

Original Score by: Bobby Krlic

Music Supervisor: Jemma Burns

Score Producer and Music Editor: Katherine Miller

Re-recording Mixer: Paul Hsu

Cast:

Joaquin Phoenix (*Beau Wassermann*)

Nathan Lane (*Roger*)

Amy Ryan (*Grace*)

Stephen McKinley Henderson (*therapist*)

Hayley Squires (*Penelope*)

Denis Ménochet (*Jeeves*)

Kylie Rogers (*Toni*)

Armen Nahapetian (*teen Beau*)

Zoe Lister-Jones (*young Mona*)

Parker Posey (*Elaine Bray*)

Patti LuPone (*Mona Wassermann*)

Julia Antonelli (*teen Elaine*)

Richard Kind (*Dr Cohen*)

Bill Hader (*UPS guy*)

USA 2023

179 mins

Courtesy of Sony Pictures

'*Stop incriminating yourself,*' Amy Ryan's Grace hisses fiercely, *à propos* of nothing, at the bewildered protagonist Beau Wassermann over a homely breakfast table. Yet Ari Aster's third feature, *Beau Is Afraid*, is a wig-out Freudian picaresque journey that lets all its neurotic complexes hang out to the max. The last section reaches a jaw-dropping crescendo in which any shreds of subtext are blasted away in a welter of images of full-on sexual anxiety. It is funny and horrifying, grievous and grief-stricken, and as incriminating as hell. No wonder Beau ends up on trial.

After his last success, *Midsommar* (2019), Aster tended to deflect questions about the next project, casually suggesting in an online interview with the photographer Gregory Crewdson that he was tempted to make a 'stupid comedy'. Now realised as a monumental journey from the very first to the very last gasp of Beau Wassermann, he describes it to me as 'a contribution to the picaresque' – an open-ended, episodic form perfect for outsize adventures in American anxiety neurosis. It is funny but also 'dead serious to me', Aster insists.

It is a thrillingly high-risk strategy for a script Aster has nursed for many years before honing the final version during lockdown. He has described *Beau Is Afraid* as containing 'more me than anything I've done before'. Since Aster's films are often divisive, designed to provoke, some might see this as an incriminating admission of self-indulgence. Yet the director also memorably describes the film to me as 'putting a stick of dynamite into everything I've done before, and blowing it up to see what happens'. He wants the film to be a 'funhouse hall of mirrors', he tells me, a Borgesian labyrinth. In a film that centres on neurotic projection, bending the world to Beau's outsized anxieties, we have to be careful about what we read into it, what we consider 'incriminating'.

Fans of Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* should know that *Beau Is Afraid* is not another elevated horror but a surreal dark comedy. It borrows its quest structure from the grand epics, although it is less Homeric than *Quixotic*, less Odysseus returning home than Dorothy on the yellow brick road encountering lots of hallucinogenic weird shit along the way.

The passive and neurotic Beau, played with an extraordinarily embodied commitment by Joaquin Phoenix, just needs to get home to see his mother. But the world keeps outbidding his worst possible fearful fantasies of it, and everything goes wrong, all seemingly his own fault. Virtually every line of dialogue Beau speaks begins 'I'm so sorry' in a wheedling, self-pitying tone. He moves from apocalyptic downtown city, a gloriously funny opening sequence, to menacing entrapment as a possible surrogate son in a menacingly bright, picture-perfect suburban house. This is followed by a brief idyll of plenitude in the magic woods among the 'Orphans of the Forest', a theatre group that seems to be staging a play about Beau's best version of himself. On stage, a long-lost dad is finally united with, and embraces, his loving sons. Everything is green, luscious and fecund but ends in a hail of bullets and Beau loses consciousness again. Eventually, way too late, he stumbles into his mother's terrifying modernist house, where the sharp angles of the corridors and open-plan chasms brim with dread.

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Mon 22 May 18:15

Preview: *The Old Man Movie: Lactopalypse!* + Q&A with directors Mikk Magi and Oskar Lehemaa

Fri 26 May 18:15

World Premiere: *Straight 8 2023 Top 25*

Sat 27 May 18:00

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Mon 22 May 14:00

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Mon 22 May 18:25

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Tue 23 May 18:15

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These four chapters are interspersed with crucial flashbacks to traumatic childhood memories that give propulsive force to these final encounters with a childhood sweetheart (an incredible Parker Posey cameo), his mother (an imperious Patti LuPone) and something bad in the attic.

The film, then, is also an American road movie – one that has echoes that range from the solemnity of the homecoming in Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) to the knockabout farce of John Hughes's *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* (1987). And it is also a possible capstone to that venerable tradition of comedy about neurotic Jewish sons and their domineering mothers: a bit of George Costanza from *Seinfeld* (1989-98), an echo of Albert Brooks's run of comedies up to *Mother* (1996) – a touchstone for Aster; and possibly even outdoing the giant critical mother who appears in the sky over Manhattan in Woody Allen's *Oedipus Wrecks*, his contribution to the portmanteau film *New York Stories* (1989). There's a shared sensibility of surrealism, guilt, toxicity and grief with the films of Charlie Kaufman. The angle of a shot of a body floating in a swimming pool is borrowed from the opening of Billy Wilder's *Sunset Blvd.* (1950), and Aster confirmed to me that the tortured relationship of Norma Desmond and Joe Gillis was one of his key reference points. Indeed, one working title for the project as a whole was *Disappointment Blvd.* The mother's monologue of denunciation, delivered by a severe LuPone, is worth waiting for, and is a monumental entry into this black comedy tradition of terrifying mothers.

If this sounds like a rag-bag of genres and sources, it is. As we discuss reference points, Aster says: 'These are all things that I love, and you metabolise the things you love.' *Beau Is Afraid* is one of those capacious and frenetic movies with a run-time of three hours and an episodic structure that allows for wildly different styles, tones and looks, including animated sequences. Each frame is overloaded with information – every ad, sign and piece of graffiti in the city mirrors Beau's anxious state ('Murder by Fuck', 'Jesus Sees Your Abominations'). It feels similar to the crazy pace, wild twists and overdetermined images of Darren Aronofsky's *mother!* (2017) or, more recently, Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). Independent production has given favoured auteurs a new kind of freedom to follow ideas into very strange places, the stranger the better it seems, and streaming habits have extended running times. Aster said he wanted to honour the intensity and strangeness of his script, and not compromise: the production entirely follows through on that. Given the success of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* at the Oscars, perhaps we should start calling this Hollywood's New Chaotic Style.

His actors were happy too, Aster says, to jump into this chaotic dream-logic. It must have been an extraordinary script to read, but Aster says 'there were very few questions. Everyone was game.' He had wanted to work with several of the actors – he mentions Posey and Denis Ménochet, in particular – and they all came on board without demur, despite the extremity of their roles.

Roger Luckhurst, *Sight and Sound*, June 2023