EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Love Your Furry Friends and Love Your Humans

Filmmaker Alex C. Cohen and stars Charlie McDermott and Vanessa Marano on the kitten-led indie PETUNIA: a proof-of-concept short that came full circle, a professor who finally said yes, learning to cry on cue, and why the film ends in a "really hopeful place." Its last Austin Film Festival screening is tonight.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

If you're in Austin tonight, Monday, November 2, there's one more chance to catch *Petunia* on a big screen before the Austin Film Festival wraps its run. The film plays at 6:40 p.m. CT at the Galaxy Theater, the same theater where it had its world premiere in competition on opening night, Thursday, October 29.

Charlie McDermott, beloved to a generation of TV viewers as Axl Heck on *The Middle*, and Vanessa Marano, of *Switched at Birth* and *Gilmore Girls*, lead the cast, with Petunia herself credited as "introducing." The film follows Alex, an aspiring photographer, whose girlfriend Lily gives him a kitten he never wanted. When Petunia gets sick, vet visits and bills test the couple, and the cat becomes his artistic inspiration. Behind the camera is Alex C. Cohen, who described *Petunia* as his first feature film. In the interview it becomes clear the story is his own: in Marano's words, Petunia the actual cat "taught Alec in real life."

Paul Salfen sat down with all three on Zoom during the film's virtual press day ahead of the festival. Before anyone had asked a question, they were already joking about what they were about to put "an unsuspecting audience" through.

"We're very excited," came the answer. "We want to see people's reactions for sure."

"I WISH EVERY DAY COULD BE LIKE THIS"

Salfen noted that being on a set isn't always fun, but this one looked like a joy to make. "I would say so," Cohen said. "It's my first feature film, and I just felt so overjoyed with the team we were able to put together. And I don't know, Charlie and Vanessa probably had a different experience, but for me it was like, this is awesome. I wish every day could be like this, despite all the stress and craziness."

McDermott agreed, then explained why independent productions are so all-or-nothing. "I feel like indie films are either the best or the worst experience," he said. "There's no real middle ground, because there's no money. Pretty much everyone is there because they want to do it. I've been on a couple indie films that have fallen apart, and then a couple that people just finished because they committed to it. This is one of the ones that really goes well and everyone loves it. It's the best. This was absolutely one of the best times I've had making a film."

> *"Indie films are either the best or the worst experience. There's no real middle ground, because there's no money." — Charlie McDermott*

THE VET'S OFFICE, TWICE

Salfen asked whether a particular day stood out, a moment when each of them looked around and thought, *I'm so glad we did this*.

"I don't really remember the shoot. It was such a blur," came the first answer, only half joking. Marano described the two kinds of days on any set. On some, "you're really getting to stretch yourself as an actor." On others, "you're shooting scenes that are kind of like the filler scenes, but you're getting to just be with people and talk and make jokes. That's one of the biggest joys of filmmaking, being around people and getting to interact."

That reminded the group of a scene in the veterinarian's office, which was shot in the first week. The apartment scenes came first, during the first three days. "All that felt good," one of them recalled, "but it was so disorienting, because it jumps through the whole film. But something about that scene in the vet's office, I was like, oh, this is really working really well."

For Cohen, the vet's office meant even more. "The craziest one for me was our very last day," he said. "We were also at a vet's office, and it was actually the same place we shot the short film, the proof-of-concept short film. So for it to come full circle two and a half years later just felt completely surreal. Same owner, kind of the same people walking around the real vet. And just to take that picture with the whole cast and crew. It's so beautiful that we pulled it off."

> *"For it to come full circle two and a half years later just felt completely surreal." — Alex C. Cohen*

"THE BEST CAMERA IS THE ONE THAT YOU HAVE"

Salfen loves festival audiences for their questions, and for the aspiring filmmakers in the seats who look at the screen and think, *That's what I want to do.* What advice, he asked, would they give someone who wants to tell a story like this one?

Cohen didn't hesitate. "The most important thing is just to always be doing something," he said. "I have a lot of friends who are brilliant writers and great directors, but they sit on their ideas, or they write too big for what they can logistically produce. I think it's just so much more important that you're getting your reps in every day with whatever you have. The best camera is the one that you have. The best actor is the available actor that's going to do it and put a smile on their face. So just go out there and make it. And if you fail upwards enough, your movie will be playing at Austin Film Festival soon."

> *"The best camera is the one that you have. The best actor is the available actor." — Alex C. Cohen*

Speaking for the actors, the advice was the same: start with the page. "Do as much as you can. It seems daunting, because there are financial restrictions to that. But there are no financial restrictions to actually writing a script. You can write a script at any single time. Whether you're an actor, whether you're a filmmaker, whether you're a sound mixer, actually try to write an idea. We're all creative people. We all are storytellers, no matter what aspect of this industry we're in."

The answer that stuck with Salfen most, which he brought up again after the recording, came from McDermott, and it was about a lost decade. "The hurdle that took me so long to get over," he said, "is that as a kid, a teenager, it was so natural. I was making stuff all the time and I was making it for me, and I loved it. It was so easy and effortless and just fun. And then I kind of got lost for almost a decade, trying to make something for the industry, as a showcase. I started anticipating other people's perspectives, trying to entertain an invisible audience."

What changed things, McDermott said, was going back to work that meant something to him personally. "If you can make something that you like, it's just impossible that no one else will like it. There are so many people in the world. If you like it, someone else will. If I was speaking to my younger self, I'd just say: stop trying to entertain an invisible other, and make something that you like. You'll find an audience and like-minded people through that."

Then he added one more piece of advice: make it terrible first. "Something that is terrible but at least created is better than nothing at all."

> *"Stop trying to entertain an invisible other, and make something that you like. You'll find an audience." — Charlie McDermott*

HAIL MARY MOMENTS

Salfen's co-host is Dallas Cowboys great and Pro Football Hall of Famer Drew Pearson, the man who caught the original Hail Mary, and the two of them often talk about the moments in a life or career when you just have to throw it and go for it. He asked each guest for theirs.

Cohen's came before a single frame was shot. "We had a lot for the production of this movie," he said. "One that really stood out to me was our main producer, David Hemphill. He was my producing teacher. I went to school and was like, I need a producer. I talked to all the producing students, and no one wanted to take a risk on this movie. And I would just go to David's office hours every Wednesday and stay there the whole time and talk to him about my movie, until he finally said yes, the last day of school. And then we were shooting like three months later."

Marano's answer went back to childhood. "Charlie and I are both coming from being child actors, so there's a weird amount of stumbling into something," she said. Her turning point came when she moved into producing, before she wrote or tried directing. "I suggest everyone try to do it, and maybe do it on your friends' short films so that you can do it for yourself as well. I've produced things that I've directed and written too, which is a whole living nightmare, as Alec, I'm sure, knows."

"Rewarding," she said. "But you feel like a crazy person. When your sole job is just to produce something, you oftentimes feel like, oh, I'm not equipped to do this. No one really is. That's the thing. Even the most experienced producer will tell you every single day is still like, oh, I've never been in this situation before, so we're just going to have to figure that out, because someone's got to. So that's probably the biggest Hail Mary in my career, the thing that led to me becoming a multi-hyphenate: the decision to try to produce something when I had no business actually doing that. And I'm glad I did."

McDermott kept his answer to acting. "I feel like every audition is a Hail Mary," he said, as Marano chimed in, "That's so true, Charlie." "The odds are so low. You have to give it all you've got," he went on. "You can't see where the ball is, and you're just going and hoping they even throw it to you, let alone catch it."

> *"Every audition is a Hail Mary. You can't see where the ball is, and you're just hoping they even throw it to you, let alone catch it." — Charlie McDermott*

A BAG OF NUTS AND A RAMP INTO THE SCENE

Mindset is another of Salfen's regular topics, so he asked how the actors get themselves to the deeply emotional places a film like *Petunia* demands.

McDermott was refreshingly honest. "I didn't have to cry very much in my career," he said. "And I really was hoping to. I wanted a project to do that. I didn't think I'd get a movie where that's what I did almost every page. But I remember the first week just seeing Vanessa could just kind of turn it on and off, and I felt like I was working so hard. Not to say that Vanessa's not working hard, but I was like, I don't even know how to get there."

In the first week, he said, he was trying to get somewhere intentionally with every scene, and it caught up with him. "The last thing that I did week one was this alleyway scene, and I really worked myself." He turned to his co-star: "Do you remember when I passed out?"

"I don't even know how that happened. I was so pale. They brought me a bag of nuts," he said, laughing. "This is not how I wanted this to go. But somewhere around the second and third week, there was no process anymore. I don't know where I was pulling it from, but it was just there."

Marano said part of it is the different paths young actors take. "Charlie didn't have to cry that much," she said. "I had to learn how to cry very early on, because that's just how it is. It really is kind of the 10,000 hours, the *Outliers* rule. You spend enough time doing something, you can access it more easily."

Her most important lesson came from Anthony LaPaglia, who played her father on *Without a Trace*. "He was like, you've got to give yourself a ramp in the scene," she said. "You have to start the work to start crying much earlier in the scene than when you actually start crying. That helped me a lot. No one really loves this answer, because it's not very romantic, but I am a very technical person with it."

> *"You have to start the work to start crying much earlier in the scene than when you actually start crying." — Vanessa Marano, on advice from Anthony LaPaglia*

CONDITIONAL VERSUS UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Before letting them go, Salfen asked what they hope audiences talk about on the way out of the theater. He knew people would take different things from it, since "there's a lot going on here."

Marano spoke for the group. "I think the most important thing, for me and I think for all of us on this call, that people take away from this movie is that it actually does end in a really hopeful place. It ends in a really, really loving place. This idea of conditional versus unconditional love is the overall theme of this story."

"In a world where there's a lot of stresses, a lot of things seem finite and temporary," she continued, "it doesn't make life any less worth living or less beautiful. And that's what I think Petunia the cat teaches these characters, and Petunia the actual cat taught Alec in real life. Pets are a part of our lives, and we're their whole lives. So it's just reminding ourselves to love our furry friends and love our humans."

> *"It's just reminding ourselves to love our furry friends and love our humans." — Vanessa Marano*

SEE IT AT THE GALAXY

The team was clearly excited about Austin. Asked whether they'd make it to Texas, they promised beer, barbecue and good movies, and they talked up the rest of the lineup too. "There's actually some incredible films coming to the festival besides *Petunia* that I've had a chance to see," came the plug. "So I hope everybody gets their film badges." The pitch for the Galaxy was simple: "Make the drive. It's going to be worth it." Opening night came with a red carpet. Tonight, the group said, "is going to be awesome."

Then Salfen signed off with the line he uses best: "Everybody break legs. I'm rooting for Team Petunia."

FIND *PETUNIA*

Directed by: Alex C. Cohen

Starring: Charlie McDermott, Vanessa Marano, and introducing Petunia

Producer: David Hemphill

Logline: An aspiring photographer reluctantly agrees to keep the kitten his ambitious girlfriend gives him for his birthday, only to form an unexpected bond that transforms his art, tests their relationship, and brings his life into focus. Based on a true story.

Austin Film Festival: World premiere, Opening Night, Thursday, October 29, Galaxy Theater. Final screening **tonight, Monday, November 2, 6:40 p.m. CT, Galaxy Theater.**

Trailer: vimeo.com/1207543201/8124967f4a

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine during the PETUNIA virtual press day for the Austin Film Festival, October 2026.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting