

# Bradley Cooper and Will Arnett Storm the Stand-Up Stage in *Is This Thing On?*

Arnett did weeks of comedy shows in character to play a man facing a divorce and finding new purpose during a “midlife catharsis” in the Cooper-helmed comedic drama.

BY [REBECCA FORD](#)



JASON MCDONALD

The first time **Will Arnett** met **Bradley Cooper** was for an audition—of sorts. At the time, Arnett was dating **Amy Poehler**, who had become good friends with Cooper during filming on their 2001 movie, *Wet Hot American Summer*. Poehler wanted to see what Cooper thought of Arnett, so they all met up at a bar in New

York, joined by fellow Poehler pal **Janeane Garofalo**. “Amy sort of paraded me in front of two of her friends to see if I was okay,” says Arnett. “They didn’t grill me, but it was a lot of like, ‘All right, who’s this guy?’”

Arnett would pass the test (he and Poehler married and were together for nine years), and he and Cooper would become good friends, later living next door to each other in Venice, California. “We lived two doors down from Dennis Hopper, and we used to always be like, ‘Man, Dennis Hopper lives right there!’” says Arnett. “It blew our minds.” Cooper [also credits Arnett](#) with helping him get on the path toward sobriety during that time.



Arnett and Dern play a couple on the verge of divorce.

JASON MCDONALD

Both men would go on to have busy careers, with Arnett starring in shows like *Arrested Development*, *30 Rock*, and *Flaked*. Cooper starred in films such as those in the *Hangover* franchise, *American Hustle*, and *American Sniper*, before pursuing his directorial career with *[A Star Is Born](#)* and *[Maestro](#)*.

They would often talk about working together, but the right thing never came along. That changed with a script about a fledgling stand-up comic in crisis. The film, *Is This Thing On?*, which will have its world premiere at the New York Film Festival on October 10 before being released in select theaters by Searchlight on December 19, feels to them like the culmination of a 25-year friendship, full of personal touches from their own histories. It also allows Arnett and Cooper to show different sides of their abilities. The comedic drama follows a middle-aged man, Alex (Arnett), who's on the verge of a divorce and seeking new purpose in the New York comedy scene. At the same time, his wife, Tess (**Laura Dern**), is confronting her own history as the two are forced to navigate co-parenting and identity.

The film aims to pull audiences into the subculture of the New York comedy scene. "This movie is not a midlife crisis—it's a midlife catharsis," says Cooper in his first interview about the film. "Sometimes you realize you're coasting and you've lost your rudder and your North Star in life, and that takes a toll on whoever is in your orbit."

Arnett met British comedian **John Bishop** at a social event several years ago, and was struck by his story of how he stumbled into stand-up comedy when his marriage fell apart. He convinced Bishop to let him and writing partner **Mark Chappell** take a stab at a film inspired by his story. Arnett brought an early draft of the script to Cooper while he was in production on *Maestro*, and Cooper signed on to cowrite and direct it. "I think that something interesting that I wanted to explore is that this guy's able to be honest with a room full of strangers in a way that he wasn't able to be before," says Cooper, who also has a supporting role as Alex's close friend.

They decided they would open on the day when Tess tells Alex she wants a divorce, rather than chronicling all the messy lead-up to that moment. "You don't really know anything other than that they just decided to break up," says Cooper.

“But there’s no cataclysmic thing.” It’s through Alex’s process and the progression of his burgeoning stand-up career that you learn more about who he is, while also witnessing his metamorphosis. “The effect that it has on his life is so huge,” says Arnett, “because it allows him to talk in a way that he never talked before and to be open and vulnerable.”

Cooper’s first two feature directorial efforts, *A Star Is Born* and *Maestro*, both center on entertainers, as does *Is This Thing On?* But what’s more of a through line in his Oscar-nominated work as a director is the authenticity with which he makes his movies. For *A Star Is Born*, he and **Lady Gaga** sang live in front of real audiences of thousands; for *Maestro*, Cooper spent six years learning to conduct an orchestra. Before shooting *Is This Thing On?*, Arnett performed shows in character as Alex four to five times a week for six straight weeks.

Despite his comedic success onscreen, Arnett had never before performed stand-up. There were times it went really well, and times it didn’t—sometimes even on the same night. At the Comedy Cellar one night, he “absolutely crushed it,” says Cooper. “We were talking about [how] maybe after the movie, I’ve got to direct his Netflix special at Madison Square Garden.” And then they walked to another club to do the same set, where he absolutely bombed. “Not only is nobody laughing, but people have a look of disdain on their face and there’s nowhere for me to hide,” says Arnett. “You can’t even imagine how vulnerable you feel in that moment.”





Along with directing, Cooper plays Alex's friend in the film.

JASON MCDONALD

But it was perfect for the character. This is not a story about the next **Michael Jordan** of stand-up stumbling into a comedy club and having a meteoric rise to stardom. It's about a regular guy who uses stand-up to figure himself out. "Will's the funniest guy you'll ever meet in a room," says Cooper. "And for him to play a guy who's not really good at stand-up and just sort of working his way, that was incredible to behold."

Cooper and cinematographer **Matthew Libatique**, his frequent collaborator, wanted audience members to feel like they were active participants in Alex's world. They used handheld cameras and Cooper picked locations in New York, attempting to capture the feeling he had when he first came to the city for graduate school.

Cooper also took on a new role for this film: camera operator. It allowed him to get even closer to the actors to create the intimacy he hoped to capture in the film. “It’s incredibly rare when your director knows exactly what he wants and needs, and he is literally able to whisper in your ear while shooting you,” says Dern. “It’s like the three of us have shared lifetime memories of either laughing hysterically in the middle of a take or [being] in tears at the end of it because something happened that we didn’t expect and it felt human and beautiful.”



“It was a interesting exploration and required a tremendous amount of focus,” says Arnett, pictured with Dern.

JASON MCDONALD

Cooper has been friends with Dern for more than a decade and thought that the role of Tess would feel like a new challenge for the Oscar-winning actor. “I wanted to



write something that merited her worth,” he says. “Also, I wanted to do something that would push her, that maybe she hadn’t done before.”

Dern calls the role “radically different” from the types of characters she’s known for portraying. “I have played very emotional people in my life—deeply empathic, emotional characters and crazy, addictive characters and angry characters, but always emotion is at the forefront,” she says. But Tess, a former Olympic-level volleyball player, is stoic and determined. To understand her point of view, Dern spent time with former professional athletes, including her friend **Gabrielle Reece**, who talked to her about what it’s like for an athlete when their career ends: “That was a really interesting but far more still character for me.”



Cooper (right) also operated along with directing.

JASON MCDONALD

Dern’s experience shooting the movie reminded her of her early days in indie filmmaking. And though she’s visited Cooper in editing bays and talked to him about film for years, this was her first time seeing him in a new light as her

director. “He just takes the wildest swings—and he tries everybody’s note, but he sticks to his vision and gives himself the freedom to find it,” she says.

Filming concluded only four months ago, and Cooper has been rushing to wrap up editing in time to make the New York Film Festival’s closing night. Arnett hasn’t done stand-up since filming wrapped, but when Cooper and Arnett were recently viewing a cut of the film in New York, Cooper turned to Arnett and asked if he wanted to go over to the Cellar to perform a set. For a minute, Arnett thought he’d do it. “There was an addictive quality to it,” says Arnett. “That’s how good it feels.”

*Is This Thing On?* will premiere at the New York Film Festival before being released in US theaters on December 19. This feature is part of [\*Awards Insider’s exclusive fall film festival coverage\*](#), including first looks and exclusive interviews with some of the biggest names set to hit Venice, Telluride, and Toronto.



Andra Day (right) plays Tess' friend Christine.

JASON MCDONALD