

OFFICIAL SELECTION 2024  
**tiff Platform**  
TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL



A WILDING PICTURES & HAWKEYE PICTURES PRODUCTION

## PAYING FOR IT

DAN BEIRNE EMILY LÊ

CASTING JENNY LEWIS CSA SARA KAY CSA KAYLENE OSBORNE CSA MUSIC COMPOSERS DYLAN GAMBLE SOOK-YIN LEE

PRODUCTION DESIGNER OLIVIA D'OLIVEIRA DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY GAYLE YE EDITOR ANNA CATLEY

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS DAN BEIRNE JOHN CAMERON MITCHELL PRODUCED BY MATT CODE AESCHYLUS POULOS SONYA DI RIENZO

BASED ON THE GRAPHIC NOVEL BY CHESTER BROWN WRITTEN BY SOOK-YIN LEE JOANNE SARAZEN

DIRECTED BY SOOK-YIN LEE

Produced with the participation of TELEFILM CANADA, ONTARIO CREATES  
Produced in association with CRAVE a Division of Bell Media Inc., CBC FILMS



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**PAYING FOR IT** is a live-action adaptation of Chester Brown's best-selling graphic novel directed and co-written by Sook-Yin Lee (*Octavio is Dead!*, *Year of the Carnivore*). It stars Dan Beirne (*Twentieth Century*, *Priscilla*), emerging actor Emily Lê (*Riceboy Sleeps*), acclaimed activist/author/performer Andrea Werhun (*Modern Whore*, *Thriving: A Dissociative Reverie*). It is produced by Matt Code of Wildling Pictures (*See for Me*, *Mary Goes Round*, the upcoming *Young Werther*), Sonya Di Rienzo (*Brother*, *The Young Arsonists*, the upcoming *The Players*) and Aeschylus Poulos (*Mr. Dressup: The Magic of Make-Believe*, *Brother*, *Sleeping Giant*) of Hawkeye Pictures; co-produced by Natalie Urquhart (*Suits*, *Stardust*), and Lee, and Executive Produced by Dan Beirne and John Cameron Mitchell (*Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Shortbus*). The screenplay is co-written by Lee and Joanne Sarazen (*Backspot*, *Tammy's Always Dying*).

Cinematography by Emmy Award-winner Gayle Ye (*You Can Live Forever*, *Bria Mack Gets a Life*), production design by Olivia D'Oliveira (*Dreaming is a Private Thing*, *A Fermenting Woman*), costume design by Cameron Lee (*Close to You*) and editing by Anna Catley (*We Forgot to Break Up*, *Infinity Pool*). Dylan Gamble from the band Hot Garbage and Lee composed the original score.

The movie celebrates the vibrant underground comic and zine era through the experiences of cartoonist Chester Brown. Director Sook-Yin Lee connects the past with the present by bringing together emerging comic actors, performance artists, authors, activists and multimedia creators in front of and behind the camera.

**PAYING FOR IT** is produced by Wildling Pictures and Hawkeye Pictures with the participation of Telefilm Canada, Ontario Creates and in association with Bell Media's Crave and CBC Films.

### Logline

When an introverted cartoonist's girlfriend wants to redefine their relationship, he begins sleeping with sex workers and discovers a new kind of intimacy in the process.

### Synopsis

**PAYING FOR IT** is a live-action adaptation of acclaimed alternative-cartoonist Chester Brown's best-selling graphic novel. In the late 90s, Chester and Sonny are a long-term, committed, romantic couple. When Sonny wants to redefine their relationship, Chester, an introverted cartoonist, starts sleeping with sex workers and discovers a new kind of intimacy in the process. **PAYING FOR IT** is about love, sex and non-monogamy for adults. It deals with the complicated subject of the exchange for sex-work versus the complications of romantic love.

### Production Notes

In a kind of double-act of portraiture, Sook-Yin Lee, Chester Brown's real-life ex, adapts his graphic novel in a compassionate and unique movie. The result is a singular work of cinematic autofiction that is alive, funny and moving. The handling of sex and intimacy is deft, narrative and necessary. Nothing is hidden, but at the same time, never gratuitous. The humour is grounded and smart. **PAYING FOR IT** is an intelligent and affecting work about love, sex and non-monogamy for adults. The story is relevant and appeals to audiences to reconsider hetero-normative lifestyles.

"What constitutes a meaningful connection? Is it possible to have one if you're paying for sex? Or, just because you're in a monogamous relationship, does it mean you love each other more? We want love, but it can seem hard to find and nurture," said Sook-Yin Lee. "I leaped at the opportunity to explore these questions with our fearless cast and crew to bring Chester Brown's brilliant graphic novel to life, that my mentor, John Cameron Mitchell – queer icon and a great filmmaker – has thrown his support behind the movie as Executive Producer, is the cherry on top."

"I loved it! Funny, touching and, despite my anarchist heart, I found Chester's neo-capitalist personal solution very persuasive as a model for loving!", said John Cameron Mitchell about the film.

Co-written by Lee and Joanne Sarazen, **PAYING FOR IT** is an adaptation of the graphic novel from Sook-Yin Lee's perspective. Lee creates impulsive characters who are a mystery even to themselves, but is aware of this and in control

of the narrative. "I wanted to push perceptions around consensual sex work and allow sex-worker perspectives to shine through", says Lee.

## **An Unusual Love Story**

This movie is a love story, but it's a love story in the most unusual way.

"Chester Brown is an iconic Canadian graphic novelist," explained actor Dan Beirne, who played him. "He was an early adopter of the autobiographical style of artists in the 60s and 70s. Some of his work, and particularly Paying For It, is highly personal and frank, valuing ethical honesty and realism above all. He's a wonderful, humble, quiet man, with a huge intellect and capacity for reflection."

"I loved the script when I first read it," Beirne continued. "Sook-Yin's idea of incorporating her own life at the time of the writing of the novel works brilliantly when considering the source material, and her own work as an artist. I was very excited about the material."

Dan Beirne had a major take away from portraying the real-life character of Chester Brown, based on an autobiographical script from Brown's former partner, Sook-Yin Lee. "I learned that there is no relationship that is purely transactional." This bit of insight was garnered from a very up-close-and-personal interaction with the director. "Sook-Yin and Chester have been friends since the 80s, so there are decades of reflection and consideration that go into their relationship. I spoke many times with Sook-Yin and Chester, both separately and together, and there was never a question they couldn't answer. They still very much live with those memories and those ideas in their lives. Sook-Yin has all the presents he made her, and she still lives in the same house where this all took place. So, every detail was accessible at the surface of their memories, as if this was all from mere months past. The guidance came very much from that place of presence. I never had to worry that there were gaps in the world, because we were living in the world."

"The character of Sonny in the movie is me, but not as I am now," said the director. In the process of writing the script, Lee had to take herself back in time and create a character that had 20 years less knowledge and experience. "Quite intentionally I did not call the character by my name. It allowed me to have a little distance, but still bring a sense memory to the character. Many of the things that happen to Sonny did happen to me, but for the rest I mixed actual events with fictional aspects."

**PAYING FOR IT** is Emily Lê's first leading role. To play Sonny, the director created a safe space for her to work in and the actors appreciated that. "The challenge of this movie is that the actors had to be ok with nudity," the director said, "because nakedness is the metaphor for vulnerability. Dan and Emily were good to go there. I was very grateful for that."

"When they first sent me the script, I recognized myself in Sonny", said Emily Lê. "She wants it all. Here she is in this new city with this new cool job, she's surrounded by all these cool people with new and different opportunities coming at her from all directions. She has Chester, who is solid as a rock offering her so much stability, but she's craving new experiences. When you are surrounded by creative people, it's hard to look at the security of a traditional relationship and feel that it's enough. At core, Sonny wanted to give herself the life she didn't have when she was growing up."

When Sonny asked to open up the relationship, Lê explained that it never crossed her mind that Chester may ever end up going out and paying for sex. When it does happen, "She freaks out, playing out all the possible worst-case scenarios in her head (are you using protections, where did you meet these people, are they going to start showing up at our home). These are sexually and romantically progressive people, but once reality hits, it's never as you expect it. It's scary at first. Sonny does not understand this world. Chester offers her some details of what is going on for him, but he is very private and plays his cards close to his chest."

"At the start of the story, Sonny is never alone. As Sonny goes through different relationships, none of which turn out well, she is confronted with herself, and by the end, she is left alone to reckon with herself. We see these two people

go through the ebbs and flows and find their way back to each other. These two people really do love each other. I think Sonny finds family in her friends because she didn't have that growing up," Lê concluded.

Andrea Werhun plays Yulissa/Denise, an independent, open-minded, and charming young woman with a passion for sharing her wide breadth of knowledge about Toronto architecture and history. She also works as an escort, which is how she meets Chester. Prior to the filming of **PAYING FOR IT**, Werhun had a longstanding collaborative relationship with Chester Brown, which is the main reason she accepted the role of Denise. She read the graphic novel of [Paying For It](#) in 2013 and fell in love with it. In subsequent years, she and Brown connected through her award-winning short film, *Modern Whore* (SXSW 2020) directed by Nicole Bazuin, based on Werhun's memoir by the same name, in which Chester plays a client of Werhun's. Brown also illustrated the movie poster.

"Being asked to play Chester's long-term service provider in Sook-Yin's adaptation, and to continue our creative dance around each other's respective works, remains a tremendous honour," Werhun said. "As a fan of Chester Brown's graphic novel, I was really excited to see the way Sook-Yin Lee was able to uniquely adapt the book to the big screen. I loved the way Sook-Yin incorporated her own story into the cinematic rendering of Chester's tale -- not only was she there, but her questioning of their romantic relationship was the catalyst that launched him on his journey. With stories that involve sex work, it's important to remember that it takes two to tango. Sex workers take immense risks to tell their own stories and bear the brunt of societal discrimination and violence by "coming out" and revealing their identities. It is both rare and brave for someone like Chester Brown to reveal his proclivities for paying providers of sexual labour, without dehumanizing them in the process. It is important for clients to find the courage to speak openly about why they choose to pay for sex and defend sex workers in their fight for equality and labour rights."

### **The Meta-ness of Storytelling**

The city of Toronto, where the actual story took place, provides the backdrop for **PAYING FOR IT** with a vibrant specificity of time and place. The indie community rallied around Lee and the production, which filmed in a number of locations playing themselves: legendary local music venue Sneaky Dee's (open since 1987 and at its current location since 1990); the iconic neighbourhood of Kensington Market; as well as the actual house where Chester and Sook-Yin lived together.

The film features real ground-breaking artists whose iconic music and videos capture an intergenerational indie spirit: Thrush Hermit (90s Halifax Pop Explosion), cub (D.I.Y. lo-fi indie-pop band), Ghetto Concept (O.G.'s of Canadian hip hop), Pointed Sticks (70s era punk/new wave trailblazers), gob (westcoat post-skate-punk) , V.I.P. (one of the few independent Canadian boy bands) and Vypers, icons of the Toronto psych scene.

The film also includes original drawings created by Chester Brown, both within the film as well as in the titles and end credits that bookend the production.

### **The New Edition of the Graphic Novel**

The live-action adaptation of [Paying For It](#) found its world premiere at TIFF2024 as the only Canadian title in the Platform Programme. The fall of 2024 will also see a re-issue of [Paying For It](#), the graphic novel, in a new paperback edition from Drawn & Quarterly, with a cover by Chester Brown inspired by the film adaptation, an introduction written by director Lee, as well as expanded notes, movie stills, behind-the-scenes photographs, and artwork that Brown created for the production. The re-release and film launch culminate a journey that started long ago.

From the introduction by Sook-Yin Lee of the 2024 re-issue of Chester Brown's [Paying For It](#):

Chester Brown is my best friend. We met over half of my life ago. His comics were introduced to me by an underground comics aficionado, John MacBain, who was the sound tech for my band, Bob's Your Uncle. Chester's work is playfully audacious, smart, and subversive. In photos, his big, haunted eyes and slender femininity made him come across like a vulnerable Canadian Kafka, holed up in a rooming house in Toronto, drawing the most extraordinary stories.

Initially Chester was published in single issues in his comic book series, Yummy Fur. He encouraged readers to write to him. While on tour with Bob's Your Uncle, we stopped in Toronto. I left a note at his address and invited Chester to our show. He showed up, and soon we fell in love. He moved to Vancouver to be with me. We stayed there for a few years, until the mid-nineties, when I landed my first real job as a VJ at MuchMusic (Canada's MTV) and we moved back to Toronto with Oscar the cat.

Chester is an angel incarnate, a very rare soul. He offered me unconditional love and understanding at a time in my young adulthood when I was reeling from heavy experiences and emotions. His patient, non-judgmental, unwavering care is an anomaly. Chester is logical and fair-minded. He is grounded, self-actualized and confident, yet modest and unassuming. Chester is a brilliant non-conformist who stands by his convictions. He is my moral compass, the one who helps me find my way home.

In Toronto, we pursued different lives; mine was more extroverted. My romantic feelings began to drift as I developed crushes on other people. It never occurred to us to break up. We lived together while trying to open up our relationship, but polyamory proved difficult. Too many partners came with too many needs. Lost in messy intimacy, I realised I was a lot less open than I had thought. Meanwhile, Chester did not want to be in another relationship and lacked the social skills to flirt or date. After a long time without sex, he started paying for it.

For such a quiet and introverted person, it seemed an extreme thing to do, and I worried for his safety. I concealed pangs of jealousy by trying to appear cool and unphased. As he talked about his experiences and the plight of consensual sex workers in dangerous situations with little protection and few rights, I outgrew my ignorance and came to respect his and sex workers' choices.

While living together in a tiny house, Chester and I pursued love and connection in divergent ways: he paid for sex, and I took the more traditional dating route, bouncing from one relationship to another and making a lot of mistakes. Chester became an advocate for the decriminalization of consensual sex work and incorporated his ideas in his comics.

When Paying for It was published in 2011, I was struck by its brilliance and utility. It's an important argument made with intelligence, honesty, humour, and humanism. I asked if I could adapt it as a movie, assuring him that I would uphold his concerns, and he agreed. So began the challenge of adapting Paying For It into a movie. Chester's graphic novel is episodically structured, and it featured a sizable number of academic references and insights. I had to find a way to incorporate them through action and character development. Movies feature characters with flaws who undergo transformations, but Chester resisted and argued that he has no flaws (which is a flaw!). We creatively butted heads, and I found it very challenging to adapt his comic to a movie.

In the graphic novel, it was imperative that Chester protect the identities of the sex workers he had been involved with by removing personal or physical details that might reveal who they were. Chester centred the story on himself. I wanted the movie to illuminate working women's perspectives and delve into the political themes of the work, but I wasn't sure how to do it.

I'm a character in the memoir, as are others who were and are close to Chester, but to protect our privacy he divulged very little information about us. One day, I noticed a small detail in one of the panels: he had visited a sex worker on my birthday! It dawned on me that there was a whole other dimension to this story worth mining. I asked Chester if it was okay for me to include some of what had happened in our personal lives back then. He wondered why I would want to but gave me his blessing. It turned out to be the key to unlocking the movie adaptation by allowing me to explore the debate around traditional romance, possessive monogamy, and paying for sex from a female gaze. It also let me return to the late 1990s, a dynamic cultural moment and a time when I was grappling with my sexuality, independence and identity, with unsettling fears close to the surface. The movie is a departure from the original source material, but it honours Chester's vision, which, given the current legal situation, is as urgent a call for decriminalisation as it was when it was first published.

## ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

**SOOK-YIN LEE (Writer, Director, Co-Producer)** is a Toronto-based filmmaker, musician, actor and broadcaster (CBC, BBC, MuchMusic). She starred in *Shortbus*, the ground-breaking 2SLGBTQ movie directed by John Cameron Mitchell that premiered at the Cannes Film Festival. Her feature film writer and directorial debut, *Year of the Carnivore*, starring Cristin Milioti, premiered at TIFF. In 2014, Lee won the Canadian Screen Award for Best Performance by a Lead Dramatic Actress in *Jack* and went on to write and perform *Unsafe* for Canadian Stage, which examined questions of censorship and artistic freedom. She won Best Director and Best Picture at the 2018 Downtown Los Angeles Film Festival for *Octavio is Dead!* --a ghost story starring Sarah Gadon and Rosanna Arquette. *Death and Sickness*, her feature movie made with Dylan Gamble, streams on CBC Gem. She acts in *Darkest Miriam*, executive produced by Charlie Kaufman, and is set to release her experimental comedy *Rest and Relax*. Sook-Yin is a music recording artist and film score composer. She contributed songs to Brandon Cronenberg's horror movies *Infinity Pool* and *Antiviral*.  
<https://www.sookyinlee.com>

**JOANNE SARAZEN (Co-Writer)** is a Toronto based writer and director of stage and screen. Screenwriting credits include the short film *I Came Here Alone*, directed by Connor Gaston (Palm Springs International Film Festival 2019), *Tammy's Always Dying*, directed by Amy Jo Johnson and starring Felicity Huffman (Toronto International Film Festival in 2019), and *Backspot* directed by D.W. Waterson, starring Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs and Evan Rachel Wood with Prospero Pictures, Night is Y and Elliot Page as Executive Producers (TIFF 2023/SXSW 2024). She is currently attached to adapt Amy Stuart's *A Death at the Party* into a series for Wildling Pictures. As a playwright, Joanne's work has been produced across Canada. She is an alumna of the Canadian Film Centre's Writers' Lab and the recipient of the Micki Moore Residency at TIFF. She is also a very accomplished waitress.

**MATT CODE (Producer)** is an award-winning producer of films and television and president of Wildling Pictures, an Ontario-based production company. Over the past ten years since opening Wildling, Code has been a producer on more than twenty features in addition to numerous shorts and over fifty episodes of television. In addition to *Paying for It*, Code also produced *Young Werther*, the directorial debut of José Avelino Gilles Corbett Lourenço, which will have its World Premiere in Special Presentations, at TIFF in 2024. Previously, Code produced *Suze* (Linsey Stewart and Dane Clark's sophomore feature film), which won multiple "Best of" fest awards; *See For Me*, which sold to IFC Midnight in the US after premiering at the 2021 Tribeca Festival; and *Mary Goes Round*, which premiered at TIFF 2017, among others. Not limited to film, Code has produced numerous award-winning TV series. Most recently Code produced the upcoming *Motorheads* (created by John A. Norris) for AMAZON and *Accused* (created by Howard Gordon for Sony) for FOX. Code is a graduate of the Canadian Film Centre's Cineplex Entertainment Film Program - Producers Lab, the Berlinale Talent Lab, and Queen's University – where he holds a BAH in Film + Media and Political Studies. Code is also a previous recipient of the prestigious Indie Screen Award for Emerging Producer (shared with Kristy Neville) at TIFF in 2017.

**SONYA DI RIENZO (Producer) and AESCHYLUS POULOS (Producer)** are the co-founders of HAWKEYE PICTURES, award-winning producers of feature films, documentaries and series. Hawkeye's projects have been selected at prestigious international festivals including Cannes, TIFF, SXSW, Locarno, BFI London, Busan Clermont-Ferrand and Hot Docs. 2022 was a banner year with both Sheila Pye's THE YOUNG ARSONISTS and Clement Virgo's BROTHER world premiering at TIFF and going on to releases in 2023. Critically acclaimed during its festival run, BROTHER was also one of TIFF Canada's Top 10 films; the winner of a record 12 Canadian Screen Awards, including Best Motion Picture and of the 2024 NAACP Outstanding International Motion Picture and Outstanding Independent Film Awards. 2023 also launched the award-winning Ireland-Canada co-production THE GRACELESS AGE and the features VALLEY OF EXILE and QUEEN TUT. Most recently the feature documentary MR. DRESSUP: THE MAGIC OF MAKE-BELIEVE, world premiered at TIFF2023 and went on to win the People's Choice Documentary Award. Upcoming Hawkeye projects include the feature THE PLAYERS by TIFF / Reykjavik Talent alumna Sarah Galea-Davis (CAN YOU WAVE BYE-BYE) and lensed by multi award-winning dop Sara Mishara (LES OISEAUX IVRES), and NEVERMAN by TIFF, Sundance and Berlinale Talent labs alumnus Rodrigo Barriuso (UN TRADUCTOR).

**JOHN CAMERON MITCHELL (Executive Producer)**

John directed/wrote/starred in the film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) for which he won Best Director at the Sundance Festival and was nominated for a Golden Globe as Best Actor. On Broadway, *Hedwig* gave him Tony Awards for his performance and for Best Revival. He directed the films *Shortbus* (2006), *Rabbit Hole* (2010) which garnered Nicole Kidman a Best Actress Oscar nomination and *How to Talk to Girls at Parties* (2017) starring Kidman and Elle Fanning. Recent TV roles include *Shrill*, *The Good Fight*, *City on Fire*, *Yellowjackets*, *Girls* and Joe Exotic in *Joe Vs. Carole*. He created the fictional podcast series *Anthem: Homunculus* starring Glenn Close, Cynthia Erivo and Laurie Anderson, as well as the upcoming *Cancellation Island* starring Holly Hunter.

**CHESTER BROWN (Author of the graphic novel, [Paying For It](#))**

Chester Brown was born in Montreal in 1960. He is the author of seven books and is best known for the non-fiction graphic novels *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* (2003) and *Paying for It: A Comic-Strip Memoir About Being a John* (2011). In 2024, Brown created a *Louis Riel* stamp for Canada Post as part of a set honouring Canadian cartoonists. He lives in Toronto.

**ABOUT THE CAST**

**DAN BEIRNE (Chester)** is an Ottawa-born actor living in Toronto. He can currently be seen on the hit Netflix series *Ginny & Georgia* and the popular Amazon series *GEN V*. He played Joe Esposito in Sofia Coppola's *Priscilla*, Hamilton Jordan in FX's *Mrs. America*, and Mackenzie King in Matthew Rankin's *The Twentieth Century*, the latter garnering him Best Actor of 2020 from the Vancouver Film Critics Circle. His other major credits include FX's *Fargo*, Guillermo Del Toro's *CABINET OF CURIOSITIES*, and Catherine Reitman's *WORKIN' MOMS*. Be sure to catch Dan in the new sitcom *ONE MORE TIME* currently airing on CBC.

**EMILY LÉ (Sonny)** is a Vietnamese-Canadian bilingual actor. She played Linh in Anthony Shim's 29-time award-winning feature *Riceboy Sleeps* and Alisha in Crave's *Pillow Talk*. Some other credits include Christopher Yip's short *Fish Boy*, CBS' *Ghosts*, and Freeform's *The Bold Type*. Keep an eye out for Emily in the new Canadian-Norwegian romantic drama mini-series *So Long, Marianne* coming soon to Crave.

**ANDREA WERHUN (Yulissa/Denise)** is a writer, performer, and producer based in Toronto. She is the author & co-creator of [Modern Whore: A Memoir](#) (2022, Strange Light/Penguin Random House Canada). The book is soon to be a major motion picture, starring Andrea and executive produced by 2024 Palme D'Or winner Sean Baker. In 2023, Andrea co-wrote, produced, and performed in *Thriving: A Dissociated Reverie*, starring Black non-binary former sex worker [Kitoko Mai](#), about their dissociative identity disorder diagnosis. The short film enjoyed its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival and was selected as one of TIFF Canada's Top Ten 2023. Andrea is also the subject, performer, and producer of the award-winning short films *Modern Whore* (SXSW) and the CBC short doc, [Last Night at the Strip Club](#) (Hot Docs). She has been interviewed by [The New York Times](#), [The Guardian](#), [CBC Radio](#), and is a regular contributor to [The Globe & Mail](#).