

AT THE MOVIES: Billy Crystal shares real-life inspirations for 'Here Today'

Peter Sblendorio
New York Daily News

What started as a disastrous lunch outing turned into a heartfelt Billy Crystal movie.

An early scene in the new comedy "Here Today" — which Crystal directed, cowrote and stars in — is based on a real-life experience by cowriter Alan Zweibel, who shared a meal with a woman who spent only \$22 at an auction to meet him.

During their lunch, the woman suffered an allergic reaction to her seafood salad, and because she didn't have insurance, Zweibel covered her nearly \$1,100 medical bill.

"It was just such a hilarious story," said Crystal, who heard Zweibel, a veteran comedy writer who was on the original "Saturday Night Live" staff, share the anecdote with late-night host David Letterman.

"I wrote him, I think, while they went to the first commercial break. I said, 'Al, this is something that we could jump off from,'" Crystal told the Daily News.

Indeed, "Here Today" begins with Crystal's character, a longtime comedy writer named Charlie, getting lunch in New York with an auction winner, Emma (Tiffany Haddish), who is unknowingly allergic to seafood.

While the plot is fictional, the movie repeatedly draws from elements of Crystal's and Zweibel's lives.

In "Here Today," released in theaters Friday, May 7, Crystal's character is quietly dealing with the early stages of dementia, and forms an unlikely friendship with Haddish's Emma.

"I was dealing with a relative who was a novelist and an editor for the Book of the Month club, and a brilliant woman, and ... she said to me profoundly, 'I'm losing



Sony Pictures/Stage 6/TNS

Billy Crystal (left) and Tiffany Haddish star in "Here Today," which was released in theaters May 7.

my words.' She started to have the onset of dementia, and then Alan revealed that his dad was suffering from this, too," Crystal said. "So we started writing."

The Manhattan-born Crystal, 73, and Brooklyn-born Zweibel, 70, made it their mission to tell a story filled with empathy.

"We treated the dementia with total respect," Zweibel told the News. "We were very, very aware that this is something that affects

people, affects the people that love people who are afflicted with this.

"We didn't make any of those jokes. We went for the raw emotionality of it."

Some aspects of the Charlie character were modeled after longtime "SNL" writer Herb Sargent, whom Crystal and Zweibel both admired during their separate stints on the show. The movie depicts Charlie as an experienced writer on a sketch comedy series.

The story also sees Emma encourage Charlie as he writes a book filled with memories about his family.

"You never know who's going to walk into your life and change it," Crystal said.

"These are two strangers who become friends in the truest sense of the word, who really define the words 'empathy' and 'love' and 'humor.' I think it's grounded in that."

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