

MEET HOLLYWOOD'S NEW MODERN FAMILY (they're adopted)



From left: Mark Wahlberg, Rose Byrne, Isabela Moner, Julianna Gamiz and Gustavo Quiroz in the new film Instant Family

When the director of the Daddy's Home comedies, Sean Anders, pitched a story about adoption, he knew what he was talking about – he and his wife had taken in 3 siblings, aged 18 months, 3 and 6. Now his new film, starring Mark Wahlberg, is winning plaudits from parents for revealing what it's really like to adopt. Helena de Bertodano talks to the whole family



Sean Anders, 49, with (from left) his children Jonny, 13, Josh, 8, and Charlene, 9. Photographed by Barry J Holmes in Los Angeles

One day when Beth Anders arrived to pick up her daughter, Charlene, from school, she found her in the playground with a new friend. The friend stared at Beth, who has blond hair with pale skin, and asked Charlene, who has dark hair and olive skin, if this woman was really her mother. “I’m adopted,” explained Charlene. “I feel so bad for you,” exclaimed the friend.

“It was funny,” says Beth, describing the moment lightly, although it must have hurt. “Cha-Cha looks at me. We get in the car and talk about it. I said, ‘She probably doesn’t know much about adoption. I wonder if it would make her think differently if you say you have a great family and a great life. Sometimes people just don’t know.’ Interestingly, this friend has a pretty broken home life herself.”

Such ignorance is one of the reasons why Beth’s husband, the director Sean Anders, decided to turn their experience of fostering children into a film. Released in the UK this week, *Instant Family* bluntly and humorously depicts both the difficulties and joys of foster care and adoption. “People view kids in foster care as potential hazards,” explains Anders, “and a lot of the time the narrative is, ‘These wonderful, saintly parents came along and gave these poor children a home.’ The reality is these kids come into your home and they bring you so much, too. It’s not a one-way street.”

In the film, Mark Wahlberg plays the adoptive father, Pete, and Rose Byrne the mother, Ellie. Anders had already directed Wahlberg in his *Daddy’s Home* comedies and sent him an early script of *Instant Family*, asking him to consider the father role. Wahlberg agreed immediately and his box-office pulling power meant the project was quickly greenlit by the studio. Anders stresses, however, that Wahlberg is not playing him per se: the family in the film are drawn from the many stories he has heard from the world of fostering over the years. Like the film family, though, Sean and Beth took in a trio of siblings: a 6-year-old boy, Jonny, his 3-year-old sister, Charlene, and 18-month-old brother, Josh. Nearly seven years have passed since they became a family.

We meet in the Four Seasons hotel in Beverly Hills, where Wahlberg is holding court, promoting the film. With all the hoopla surrounding Wahlberg, Anders and his young family go almost unnoticed as they arrive for the photoshoot. Josh, now eight, appears first in the doorway, looking shy but excited and holding his mother’s hand. “I’m hungry,” he announces. “No, he’s not,” says Anders firmly, appearing behind him. “He just knows there’s food everywhere in hotels.” His older son, Jonny, 13, is close by his side, his hair neatly combed to the side. Charlene, nine, skips

‘AS SOON AS ADOPTED CHILDREN WALK IN THE DOOR, YOU ARE IN OVER YOUR HEAD. IT’S INSANITY’

in solo and confident in her pink glittery skirt. “I’m Cha-Cha,” she announces.

They strike poses for Barry, the photographer, giggling and tickling each other. “Lovely,” says Barry. Charlene pouts. “Did you say ‘ugly?’” Absolutely not, says Barry. Josh makes the most of the confusion by bouncing off the sofa. “Can I do a cartwheel?” he asks, quickly doing one before anyone can say no, then flipping upside down and walking on his hands across the room. “Don’t knock anything over,” calls out Anders. It is merry chaos – just like life at home these days, says Beth, 43.

Their story began when Anders and his wife, who met in Wisconsin where they went to the same school, decided they were finally financially stable enough to start a family. “We had never tried to conceive,” says Anders, 49. “We were getting to the place where we were deciding whether we were going to start that process. Then I made this dumb joke: ‘Why don’t we just adopt a five-year-old? It will be like we got started five years ago.’ I was totally kidding, but Beth thought it was an interesting idea.”

Anders quickly got cold feet and tried to talk her out of it. “I had all the stereotypical concerns that people have. ‘Who are these kids? Where did they come from? What baggage are they walking in with? Am I strong enough? Am I patient enough?’”

The scene is replicated in the film when Wahlberg’s character tells his wife, “People who take in foster kids are really special; the kind of people who volunteer when it’s not even a holiday. We don’t even volunteer on a holiday.” “I’m lazy,” chuckles Anders, dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt with the words “foster love” across his chest. “One of those people who complain about politics, but I never go and get signatures for something. But that’s the point: the vast majority of the people [who foster] are just regular people, not superhuman do-gooders. The big misconception is that undertaking this is some huge weight to be lifted. You could say that about any level of parenting.”

Once the conversation had been sparked, Anders agreed to look into the process and see where it led them. “We decided not to decide, which is what I recommend to other people. Just go to an

orientation class, see how we feel ... I had an image of a solitary five-year-old. I thought that would be a great way to kick the tyres and get this figured out. Then we were told there might be siblings. That was terrifying.” At the time, they were still considering having a biological child as well. “Once it turned into three kids, it was pretty much vasectomy time.”

The orientation classes led to an adoption fair, where children stand around in groups waiting to be selected, the teenagers ignored to one side. “It felt very awkward and strange to select kids from a group. Selecting [a teenager] made it feel a bit better. She had a younger brother and sister; they seemed like really great kids and we very reluctantly wrote them down on our sheet. I knew if we wrote them down that they would match us with them, because no one else was going to [pick them]. We went home and tried to wrap our heads around what we had just done. Then a week or two later, the social workers called us and said it’s not going to work out. The teenager was holding out hope that her mum was coming for her. She was refusing the placement along with her brother and sister.”

They were upset. “We had got it into our minds that these might be our kids. We wrote to them, but never heard back.” Then they received a call about another trio of siblings. “When I look back,” says Anders, “I’m so grateful, because I love my kids so much. But I never forgot those [other] kids.”

The teenage girl they met at the fair became the seed for the film’s central character of Lizzie, a tricky but charismatic teen who struggles the most with adapting to her new family. The film does not sugar-coat the difficult process of suddenly integrating three strange kids into your family: tantrums, tears, chaotic meals, slammed doors and the oldest yelling “pretend mum” at their bewildered foster mother. “It’s

very bizarre to open your house to strangers and have them treat you like shit,” says Anders, recalling his own experience. “They’re doing it because they’re children. They’re doing all the same things that we did to our parents. But you don’t yet have that biological love and that bond. You get these kind of selfish feelings of, ‘Dammit, look at everything



we’re doing for you. Why are you behaving like this? It just messes with your mind in ways that you’re not proud of.”

Anders says he had a ridiculously romantic notion of what life would be like with foster children. They had moved to a bigger house in a better area for schools, read countless parenting manuals, pictured the idyllic family life they were going to have, right down to the corner of the house where the kids would sit to do their homework. “Then all of a sudden there was just that day when they walk in the door and they’re yours. And you’re immediately in over your head. You’re outnumbered. It’s insanity. You go through these feelings of, ‘What have we done? We had it so good before. It was so quiet. We could go out whenever we wanted. We could go to bed whenever we wanted. Nobody was waking us up.’ And then there are these questions. ‘Do we kiss the kids goodnight? Do we have to bathe them? Why is he peeing all over the seat?’ It’s a very peculiar situation to be in.”

In one of the most memorable scenes in the movie, Pete and Ellie are at their wits’ end and having serious second thoughts – trying to find a way, as Pete puts it, “to get these little arseholes out of our house ...”

“I hate them so much,” agrees Ellie. “We could just put them back. We would look like the worst people in the world, but ...”

They come up with a plan to say that some relatives have come forward to take the children back and they have no option but to give them up. The excitement wears off. “It’s a nice thought, but we’re stuck, aren’t we?” sighs Ellie. Pete agrees. “We’ve got to just accept that we made a terrible mistake and our lives are mostly going to suck now.”

Anders says that the reaction to this scene differs depending on the audience. “When you see it with a regular audience – an American audience, anyway – you just hear people gasping. ‘How could they say that?’ Then when you see it with an audience of adoptive families, they’re roaring because they’re all like, ‘We totally had that conversation.’”

How did their own kids react when they watched that scene? “Our kids have pretty good senses of humour. I showed them that scene and my daughter said, ‘Did you really say that stuff about us?’ I said, ‘No, honey. We said much worse things about you guys.’”

Anders says he would lie in bed at night and try to dream up a solution. “I would think, ‘There has to be some road back to what I had

before.’ The thing is, when you have your own kids, you don’t think, ‘Can I stuff this back in your uterus?’”

Did they ever genuinely think of sending them back? “In the moment when you’re thinking it, it feels genuine. But it’s a bit like when you say: ‘I’m going to quit my job, dammit.’ You know you’re really not going to.”

Beth, who has joined us, says, “I remember us joking, ‘Let’s pretend we adopted seven and we wake up and there are only three. That will make us feel better.’”

Sean laughs at the memory. “We’d say, ‘Let’s pretend we got rid of the four really rotten ones and just kept the three good ones.’”

They have always been open with their children about where they came from – and answer any questions they have – although they don’t share details about their birth parents publicly.

“We were told by the social workers that it’s best to talk about it as early as it seems they can handle it,” says Beth. “We’ve never shied away from it. [But] I don’t really bring it up unless they do. No one’s been really persistent. The one who’s least interested in anything in that regard is Jonny, the oldest.”

They acknowledge that at times it put a strain on their relationship. “We were both very stressed,” says Anders. “I think what we had going for us is that neither one of us really championed the idea while the other person was against it. It was more of us blaming ourselves, going, ‘Good Lord, what have we got ourselves into?’ In a lot of ways, we had to pull together between the two of us.”

Ultimately, says Beth, it has made them closer. “There’s nothing like parenting that makes you know yourself and parts you don’t want to know and thought you knew.”

“We already had a relationship,” says Anders. “And now we have this one massive thing in common that we didn’t have before. The love for these three little people.”

It took some time for the family to coalesce. Jonny was the linchpin. “He very much wanted to be part of a family,” explains Anders. “It was very important to him in his little six-year-old mind. And the others followed his lead. In particular, he really wanted a dad. That helped.”

Just a couple of days after arriving in their home, Jonny asked if it was all right to call Beth and Sean Mum and Dad. “We were like ...” Anders adopts a casual air “... ‘If you’re comfortable with that.’ Inside we’re like, ‘Oh my God.’ I don’t think he’d ever called anyone Dad before. Once I answered to it, the rest of the day it was just, ‘Dad, Dad, Dad, Mum, Mum, Mum, Dad, Dad, look at this, look at that.’” Anders’ eyes start to well up. “That story gets me.”

Beth puts a hand on his arm. “Jonny was like our puppy.” ➡

Cha-Cha found it the hardest to adapt. "She had *Exorcist*-level tantrums for a long time," says Anders. "We made a conscious decision not to try to connect the dots between this behaviour and where she came from. We're not going to discount it, but we're not going to assume that every feeling is rooted in that."

At first she would have nothing to do with Anders, but immediately bonded with Beth. "She was so emotionally sophisticated at three years old. Both of us would say, 'Good night, Cha-Cha. I love you.' She'd say, 'Good night, Mummy. I love you. Good night, Sean.'"

Beth describes her husband's reaction. "He's trying to tell himself, 'It's not about me ...'"

Anders interjects. "But it really surprised me how much that hurt me. I'm not proud of this, but I would be excited when she would have a nightmare, because I could go in her room and she would give me a hug. It'd be the one time."

Then one night he was putting her to bed and she said, 'Good night, Daddy.' "I was just like, 'Oh, shit. Whoa.' When we did turn that corner, we turned it hard. She really became my little girl. We became very, very close and we still are."

He makes the interesting point that although there is a lot of emphasis on the negative aspects of a rocky start to life, there are also positives. "Our kids were so scrappy when they came to us. They had a resilience and strength uncommon in kids their age. They weren't afraid to climb up the jungle gym; they weren't afraid to go at things. It was somewhat a product of neglect: they didn't expect someone to run to kiss their knee when they skinned it. You don't like where that positive comes from, but you still have to acknowledge it as a positive."

What annoys him most, he says, is the way people warn each other away from foster care and adoption. "If somebody gets pregnant and a couple goes to a dinner party and says, 'Hey, we're going to have a baby,' nobody says, 'I would really think twice about that, because your kid could grow up to be a drug dealer and steal your car.' They just assume the best. Yet when people get involved in foster care, their minds immediately go to those places. But the reality is, those kids are still just kids. It's crazy that people go out of their way to talk people out of providing homes for kids that need families."

Their own three children run in and out of the room while we talk. At one point, Cha-Cha catches sight of a ballroom with chandeliers. "Jonny! Josh!" she calls excitedly. Jonny, who is playing games on his father's phone, is not interested, but Josh runs after her. They break dance and moon walk, balancing round the fountain. Josh climbs up a pillar. "Josh, be careful," calls out his sister. "He's the naughtiest," she explains to me. "And I'm always the innocent person."

I ask Jonny what he thinks of the film. "The first five times I watched it were good," he says, rolling his eyes in the direction of his parents. "The last ten times were ..." he trails off, lost in the game he is playing.

You can probably hardly remember life before they arrived, I comment to Anders. "I fondly remember life before," he grumbles affectionately.

And yet, he says, a few months after the kids arrived, he experienced an epiphany. He woke up on a Sunday morning to a silent house. "Usually the kids would wake up really early and immediately start fighting and throwing things. This weird feeling came over me; I couldn't even identify what it was. Then I realised, 'Oh my God, I miss them.' I was excited for them to come into our room to wake us up. I knew at that point I had fallen in love with my kids." ■

Instant Family is in cinemas from Friday

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