

Sharp Stick

Sharp Stick is a 2022 American sex comedy film written, directed, and produced by Lena Dunham. It stars Kristine Froseth, Jon Bernthal, Luka Sabbat, Scott Speedman, Dunham, Ebon Moss-Bachrach, Taylor Paige, and Jennifer Jason Leigh. The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival on January 22, 2022, and was released theatrically in the United States on July 29, 2022, by Utopia. It received mixed reviews from critics. It was released on video-on-demand platforms on August 16, 2022.

Synopsis

26-year-old Sarah Jo babysits for a family of two parents, Heather and Josh and their son, Zach, who has down syndrome.

Sarah Jo lives with her single mother, Marilyn, and sister, Treina. During a discussion about love and male attraction, Marilyn advises her daughters to ask a man she admires, “Do you find me beautiful?”

The next day, Sarah Jo and Josh are alone in the family’s laundry room when Sarah Jo asks Josh if he finds her beautiful. Josh becomes flustered, and Sarah Jo lifts up her dress to reveal a scar above her vagina. Sarah Jo informs Josh that she had an emergency radical hysterectomy at age 15 which caused her to go into menopause by age 17. Sarah Jo tells Josh that she is a virgin, and Josh responds by saying that she wouldn’t want to lose her virginity to him. After some awkward rambling from Sarah Jo, Josh approaches Sarah Jo and asks if he can kiss her. Josh and Sarah Jo kiss, and Josh asks if he can go down on Sarah Jo. Josh performs oral sex on Sarah Jo and takes her virginity. Josh ejaculates quickly and becomes embarrassed. Sarah Jo reassures Josh, and he fingers Sarah Jo.^[2]

The next day, Sarah Jo returns to work and sneaks up on Josh in the attic. Josh tells Sarah Jo that they cannot have sex again. Sarah Jo lifts up her dress to reveal her scar again. This turns Josh on, and the two have sex again.

Sarah Jo and Josh take a road trip to rural New York. The couple stays in a cabin while the two lie about their whereabouts; Josh claims to have a friend commitment, while Sarah Jo blames her absence on a family emergency. During the excursion, Sarah Jo and Josh consume hallucinogenic mushrooms and smoke

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Theatrical release poster

Directed by	<u>Lena Dunham</u>
Written by	<u>Lena Dunham</u>
Produced by	<u>Lena Dunham</u> <u>Michael P. Cohen</u> <u>Kevin Turen</u> <u>Katia Washington</u>
Starring	<u>Kristine Froseth</u> <u>Jon Bernthal</u> <u>Luka Sabbat</u> <u>Scott Speedman</u> <u>Lena Dunham</u> <u>Ebon Moss-Bachrach</u> <u>Taylor Paige</u> <u>Jennifer Jason Leigh</u>
Cinematography	<u>Ashley Connor</u>
Edited by	<u>Catrin Hedström</u>
Music by	<u>Luis Felber</u>

marijuana. The two have sex repeatedly and watch porn together. Josh gives Sarah Jo a necklace. Sarah Jo goes home and continues to watch porn. She becomes interested in a porn actor named Vance Leroy.

When Sarah Jo returns to work, Heather's water breaks and she goes into labor. Sarah Jo calls Josh and leans down to comfort Heather, who notices Sarah Jo's necklace. When Josh arrives, Heather demands that she be taken to the hospital via ambulance. Josh, who has now realized that the affair has been revealed, screams at Sarah Jo. Sarah Jo leaves the house.

Distraught, Sarah Jo writes a letter to Vance Leroy about her sexual exploration. She creates two checklists of sex acts she wants to try, including "anal", "blowjob", and "necrophilia". Excited to complete her checklist, she engages in a series of casual hookups. One fling, Arvin, works in porn and promises to deliver her letter to Vance Leroy. Later Vance responds to her letter with a video that Arvin brings to her, and his words reassure her.

	Matt Allchin
Production companies	<u>FilmNation</u> <u>Entertainment</u> <u>Good Thing</u> <u>Going</u>
Distributed by	<u>Utopia</u>
Release dates	January 22, 2022 (<u>Sundance</u>) July 29, 2022 (United States)
Running time	96 minutes
Country	United States
Language	English
Box office	\$68,598 ^[1]

Cast

- Kristine Froseth as Sarah Jo
- Jon Bernthal as Josh
- Taylor Paige as Treina
- Jennifer Jason Leigh as Marilyn
- Lena Dunham as Heather
- Ebon Moss-Bachrach as Yuli
- Scott Speedman as Vance Leroy
- Luka Sabbat as Arvin
- Tommy Dorfman as Tali
- Janicza Bravo as Mercedes

Production

In April 2020, Lena Dunham moved from London to Silver Lake, Los Angeles, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. She passed the time watching a number of films from the 1970s, including *Belle de Jour*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, *Remember My Name*, and *An Unmarried Woman*. The films, as well as the impact of a hysterectomy, motivated Dunham to write, direct, and star in *Sharp Stick*. She described the film's impact on her by saying, "It was about processing my life. And then, obviously, it becomes about the characters — and not about you at all."^[2] Dunham has also stated that she wanted to create a film that depicted a young woman's complicated sexual awakening without chastising or punishing her. In a director's statement to the *Washington Post*, she noted double standards in on-screen portrayals of men and women's coming-of-age: "Men get *Alfie* — the freewheeling Brit with a theme song and a remake. Women get *Repulsion*."^[3] Dunham has likened *Sharp Stick* to a "sexual fable",^[4] and many critics have made similar comparisons to fables or fairy tales.^{[5][6][7]}

After receiving the script, Jon Bernthal and Jennifer Jason Leigh were immediately on board to star. Taylor Paige, however, was initially hesitant with joining the cast: "If I'm being honest. I was like, 'Don't you think this character was written as a white person?'" Dunham convinced Paige to star by telling her that she had written the part with her in mind.^[2]

With an all-female production crew, filming took place in secret in Atwater Village and Eagle Rock, Los Angeles, in early 2021. According to lead actress Kristine Froseth, "There was a good energy all around. We had an amazing intimacy coordinator. Everything was choreographed — no surprises." In March 2021, the film was presented to buyers at the 71st Berlin International Film Festival.^[8] In August 2021, Tommy Dorfman was confirmed to star.^[9] Dunham's husband Luis Felber composed the musical score.^[2]



Sharp Stick is the second feature film to be directed by Lena Dunham (pictured).

Amy Gravino controversy

Ahead of the film's premiere at Sundance, Amy Gravino, an autistic self-advocate and sex educator, posted a Twitter thread alleging that she was approached to be a consultant on *Sharp Stick*, but was subsequently "ghosted" by Lena Dunham and her team before she could meet with Dunham in person.^{[10][11]} In a *Variety* article covering the situation, Gravino claimed that, during the film's development process, Kristine Froseth had blindly approached her business manager after coming across a TED Talk Gravino gave in 2016. According to Gravino, Froseth had come to the conclusion that, though the script never directly indicated as such, Sarah Jo, her character in the film, showed several characteristics that suggested she was autistic. Gravino, who was grateful to accept a paying job as a consultant, reviewed the script and concurred with Froseth's analysis. Gravino also claimed in the *Variety* piece that Lena Dunham had done research on her work and was excited to meet with her. However, according to the film's producers, Dunham rejected Froseth's suggestion to hire Gravino as a consultant, and clarified to Froseth that she had never intended to depict Sarah Jo as autistic.^[10]

In the same article, an unnamed spokesperson for the film responded to the claims with a formal statement, which read in part, "Sarah Jo was never written nor imagined as a neurodivergent woman. Nothing about Sarah Jo was coded to suggest or convey neurodivergence." However, Gravino countered this response by stating, "You can't just say the character isn't going to be neurodiverse; the coding is still there and it comes across that way in the writing and acting choices, even though it's not explicitly stated." She also criticized the "infantilization" of Sarah Jo in the film, though the film's producers claimed that her childlike characterization was developed to reflect the trauma she endured, rather than to indicate that she was autistic.^[10]

Release

The film premiered virtually at the 2022 Sundance Film Festival on January 22. In an interview, Dunham said "There are many greater tragedies than me not getting to see my movie premiere but I was so excited for my cast to get to see it together. We did it on such a small scale, and everyone really brought everything

to it. It was such a harkening back to how I started. But we're planning a Zoom party. I guess people Zoomed into my wedding — and they'll Zoom into my premiere."^[2] In February 2022, Utopia acquired the film's distribution rights.^[12] It was released in theaters on July 29, 2022.^[13]

Reception

On the review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes, 49% of 102 critics' reviews are positive, with an average rating of 5/10. The website's consensus reads: "A series of promising ideas lost in scattershot execution, *Sharp Stick* stands as a disappointing setback for writer-director Lena Dunham."^[14] Metacritic, which uses a weighted average, assigned the film a score of 53 out of 100, based on 29 critics, indicating "mixed or average" reviews.^[15]

In a Sundance review for Time magazine, Stephanie Zacharek praised Lena Dunham's willingness to depict a woman's messy, flawed sexual experiences, writing, "This is a film made with tenderness, more an exploration than a definitive statement, and a reminder that awkward sex isn't necessarily bad sex: if anything, it's the ultimate proof of our bewildering, imperfect humanness." Zacharek also praised the sincerity of the film in its depiction of finding love in "a world where the Internet is better at providing the illusion of interconnectedness than it is at actually connecting us".^[16] For RogerEbert.com, Tomris Laffly awarded *Sharp Stick* three out of four stars, writing that Dunham "unearths a refreshing amount of humor, honesty, and sincerity" in the film. Laffly also described Kristine Froseth's lead performance as "extraordinary".^[7]

In The New Yorker, Richard Brody complimented the detail and perceptiveness with which Dunham fashioned the film's sex scenes, but complained that "the parts of the film involving Sarah Jo's quest of sexual experience are rushed, breezed by, diminished—as is the interpersonal, emotional part that inevitably comes into play".^[6] For the Washington Post, Ann Hornaday praised the film's "candor" and sense of humor, but criticized Sarah Jo's characterization, describing her as "a naif so innocent and so unworldly that she feels less like a fully realized human than a symbol".^[3]

Hornaday's sentiment was echoed by several negative reviews of *Sharp Stick*. In The Hollywood Reporter, Jourdain Searles questioned the reasoning behind Sarah Jo's "troubling" characterization:

What is the significance of Sarah Jo being this way? Yes, she's sexually repressed, but how can she be this naive considering the sexual openness of her mother and sister? How did she manage to glean nothing from her 26 years on Earth? It doesn't help matters that Froseth — who was roughly the age of her character at the time of filming — looks much younger than she is, and the costume choices push her uncomfortably into fetish object territory.^[17]

Adrian Horton of The Guardian gave the film two out of five stars, stating that the film's more "interesting, immersive material" becomes "torpedoed by Dunham's decision, refracted by Froseth's odd performance, to write Sarah Jo as more sexual alien than curious person".^[18] In The New York Times, Amy Nicholson described scenes involving Sarah Jo's sexual experimentation as "too humorless for satire and too artificial to support the film's eventual, deluded attempt to shift into a somewhat sincere coming-of-age tale".^[19] Dana Stevens of Slate referred to such scenes "disturbing", writing, "The wide-eyed enthusiasm with which Sarah Jo approaches this project is meant, I think, to be whimsically endearing; instead, I worried for her safety every time a stranger appeared at the door." Stevens also criticized the film's approach to contrasting

Sarah Jo with her adopted sister, the "twerking, boy-crazy" Treina, played by Taylour Paige, calling their dynamic "a pure story contrivance—and one that, given the fact Sarah Jo is white and Treina Black, carries with it racial implications that the script barrels obviously past".^[20]

Additionally, for *InsideHook*, Charles Bramesco scrutinized the "traditionalism" of Dunham's decision to write a sexually adventurous character who ultimately ends up "back into the arms of the one genuine date she actually made a connection with".^[21]

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External links

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