

Actor Emile Hirsch goes 'Wild' with director Sean Penn

By Dino-Ray Ramos
STAFF WRITER

MORE OFTEN than not, Emile Hirsch is known as "that guy" from the teen flick "The Girl Next Door." Under-the-radar films such as "Lords of Dogtown" and "Alpha Dog" made his presence on the Hollywood map more prominent. But with his starring role in "Into the Wild," which opened Friday, he's bound to find a comfortable place in the stratosphere of talented young actors.

Based on the best-selling Jon Krakauer book, "Into the Wild" tells the true story of Chris McCandless, a rebellious college graduate who sheds his identity and a promising future to be a wanderer under the moniker Alexander Supertramp. On his way to Alaska, he encounters an eccentric cast of characters, as well as dangerous and unexpected obstacles.

With Academy Award-winner Sean Penn writing and directing, Hirsch takes on the role of McCandless and is joined by a cast of high-profile actors, including Marcia Gay Harden, William Hurt, Hal Holbrook and Catherine Keener.

We recently talked to Hirsch about working on such a physically and emotionally demanding film.

Q: Did you read the book before this project got off the

If you go

► "Into the Wild"

► Cast: Emile Hirsch, Marcia Gay Harden, William Hurt, Jena Malone, Catherine Keener, Brian Dierker, Kristen Stewart, Hal Holbrook and Vince Vaughn

► Director: Sean Penn

► Where: At the California in Berkeley, the Cinearts in Palo Alto Square, the Metreon in San Francisco, the Cinearts in Pleasant Hill and the Cinearts Santana Row in San Jose

► Rated: R for language and some nudity

ground?

A: I saw the "20/20" episode (about McCandless) when I was 8 or 9 years old, but it had a big effect on me. The whole idea of a child my age watching a grown man in the wild — in my mind, I was thinking, "Who does that?"

Q: What made you want to get involved with the film adaptation of "Into the Wild"?

A: When I first got approached about the film by Sean, he told me to read the book. I read it that night. It was one of those reading experiences where you lap up the words on every page, savor it and love it. I felt like reading the book was a life-changing experience.

Q: Would you ever be bold enough to take the same route that Chris McCandless did?

A: It would certainly be tempting in the days we live in. I don't think I would not contact my family though. Going on an adventure is something that we all can relate to. The need for adventure, wanderlust — everybody feels that at some point.

Q: What kind of responsibility did you feel you had in portraying him?

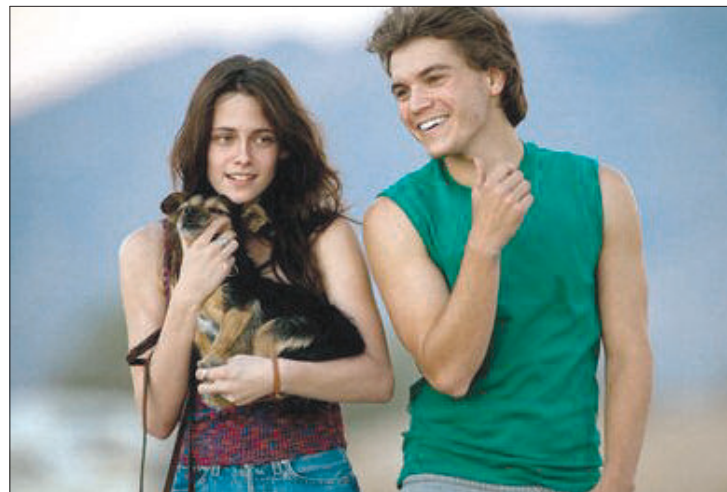
A: I felt like I had a huge responsibility because I had an enormous amount of respect for him. I also felt like he would have wanted to be portrayed honestly more than anything and that includes his flaws. We weren't out to sugarcoat Chris McCandless. We were out to try to present him as who we thought he was — warts and all.

Q: What do you think made McCandless such a magnetic and endearing person?

A: I just thought he was a very unique person with a lot of courage, conviction and a gentle, but fierce, heart. His charm was effortless.

Q: There are a lot of scenes where you are completely by yourself. What was it like working with Sean Penn on that one-on-one basis?

A: He was very helpful and supportive, but he wasn't like, "I'm Sean Penn, and I'm gonna tell you how to do this!" Part of



ENGAGING ROLE: Emile Hirsch (with Kristen Stewart) had a great time working with director Sean Penn in "Into the Wild."

what makes him Sean Penn is that he pushes you to do your best and to give what you can. It's not about what he knows; it's about helping you learn things for yourself. He's really big about that.

Q: There's one point in the movie when you're face-to-face with a bear. What was that like?

A: That was my worst and best day on set. My worst day was the beginning of (shooting that scene.) The best day was when I made it out of there alive. We did the scene over three days because the bear was having behavior problems. He didn't want to go on the path they assigned him so we shot the scene again. Then the loca-

tion didn't work, so we shot it again on another day. We ended up doing 13 takes. I was surprised that the bear left me alone in all those takes.

Q: Did you actually use any of Chris's belongings in the movie?

A: Jim Gallien, the guy who drops Chris off in the beginning of the movie, is given a watch. That was the real guy that Chris McCandless gave the watch to 14 years ago. He played himself in the movie. He kept the gold watch that Chris gave him, and he gave me the watch to wear for the film.

Q: You kept one backpack throughout the entire movie. Did the contents of that bag stay

the same for the sake of continuity?

A: We monitored what was in the bag carefully. We tried to stay true to the bag the best we could.

Q: What did you do to accomplish that dramatic (40 pounds) weight loss? Did you just not eat?

A: I'm not gonna talk about the process of weight loss (laughs). It's all about diet and exercise.

Q: Did you have a binge-fest after shooting wrapped?

A: A little bit (laughs). I ate a lot of candy, which probably wasn't the best move.

Q: What was your favorite location?

A: There were so many fun ones. Alaska was an unforgettable shooting experience for me. It was some of the most challenging physical stuff I had to do mixed with acting. By far, the most physical terrain I worked on by myself. It was kind of like this crazy challenge.

Q: What message do you hope this movie gives to audiences?

A: A positive one, not of neglect and abandonment but of love. People should be able to take what was good about Chris McCandless and learn from it and take what his flaws were and learn from those.

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