

Interview: Stephen Chbosky Explains ‘The Perks of Being a Wallflower’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on September 24, 2012 - 4:04pm

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CHICAGO – Stephen Chbosky’s “The Perks of Being a Wallflower,” based on his own book, is one of the pleasant surprises of 2012, a smart, clever, moving teen drama that brings to mind the work of John Hughes and Cameron Crowe. We’ll get into that more at the end of the week when our rave review posts but Mr. Chbosky was kind enough to sit down with us recently and talk about his debut film, one that is sure to be adored by the many fans who fell in love with his book.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: How personal is this? How much of it is YOUR story?

STEPHEN CHBOSKY: It’s really personal. It is semi-autobiographical. There is invention. Not everything that happens to Charlie happened to me but his response to the world is very much my response. It’s personal to me.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: How different is the film from the book?

CHBOSKY: It’s the same as the book in spirit and in tone. Obviously, it’s shorter. It’s a more streamlined telling of the story. In the book, I dealt a little bit more with the family. And I dealt a little bit more of the theme of the “sins of the father.” If you don’t deal with certain issues, they’ll keep repeating. I was even able to tell that a bit in the film. I cut that because I learned that with movies they’re so visceral that you can only take so much of the emotion. If you’re going to make a movie about real emotion, there’s a limit. If you go over that line, people will shut down. Even with the most restrained tone in the world. If you do three more stories, it’s like “is everybody...?” I didn’t want to make that movie.



Stephen Chbosky on the set of The Perks of Being a Wallflower

Photo credit: Summit

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Why this cast? What do Logan, Emma, and Ezra bring to this that other young actors wouldn’t?

CHBOSKY: They were the right fit. There’s no other way of putting it. There were a couple of secondary character where there were some strong other choices but for the three leads there were no...when I met Emma, I just offered her the part. I saw this one scene in “Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire” where she was on the steps with Daniel Radcliffe and I thought, “That’s her.” It wasn’t the scene but it was what was behind it. When I met her in New York and I saw this strong person but also this lonely kid in the eye of a hurricane and I thought that was

exactly how Sam felt. You see it all. You get all this great accolades. But there’s always something more you have to prove to yourself. That’s Sam. And that was Emma.

Logan — we auditioned two people for Charlie. He was the second one and there was no need after him. He brought that character. I thought, “Wow.” He just came in and gave such a great reading. He was perfect for the part.



The Perks of Being a Wallflower
Photo credit: Summit

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: He had it from day one?

CHBOSKY: Audition. That was it. It got better. He arrived a week before everyone just so he could be alone in the hotel and read the script. Sometimes you switch on a dime in film schedules — he never had to look at his script. He knew it all. He would just do it.

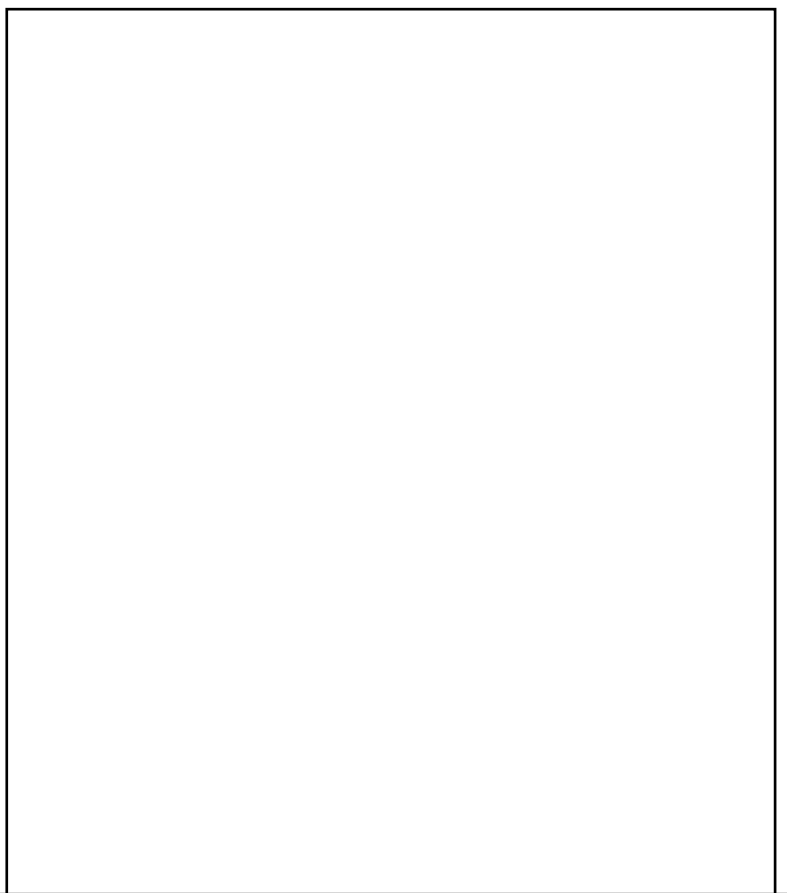
Ezra — I saw him “City Island” and my wife said, “That kid could be Patrick.” I thought he was so young in that movie but he sprouted. He auditioned and we did a callback over Skype. We offered him the part that night. He was fantastic.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: When I say “the biggest challenge,” what’s the first thing that comes to mind?

CHBOSKY: Letting go. At every stage of the process, whether it was the screenwriting phase, on the set...maybe you only have a limited amount of time and you really want a close up but you have to let go of that close up. And in post — you let go of this one you thought was great but the scene is better. Letting go. Hands down, the biggest challenge. My challenge was emotional more than artistic.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Did you consider divesting yourself of that entirely and letting someone else direct?

CHBOSKY: No. No. Never, ever, ever. I was offered...dozens. I lost count. I always knew...how do you let somebody else tell your story? That was the condition. I was either going to direct the movie or it was never going to exist. It was this or nothing. I went in and I wrote the script. I didn’t sell it. I wrote it. I did three drafts by myself. And then I got Lianne [Halfon], Russ [Smith], and John Malkovich. I did some trims based on their feedback. Summit said yes and I never got a single script note. It was done. They were really supportive. They gave great cut notes. They were really smart. But for the script, they left me alone. And then they found it a little more in cutting. I walked into Summit with Emma, Logan, and that script and they said, “Yes.”





The Perks of Being a Wallflower
Photo credit: Summit

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: It takes a certain kind of confidence to think you could direct it though.

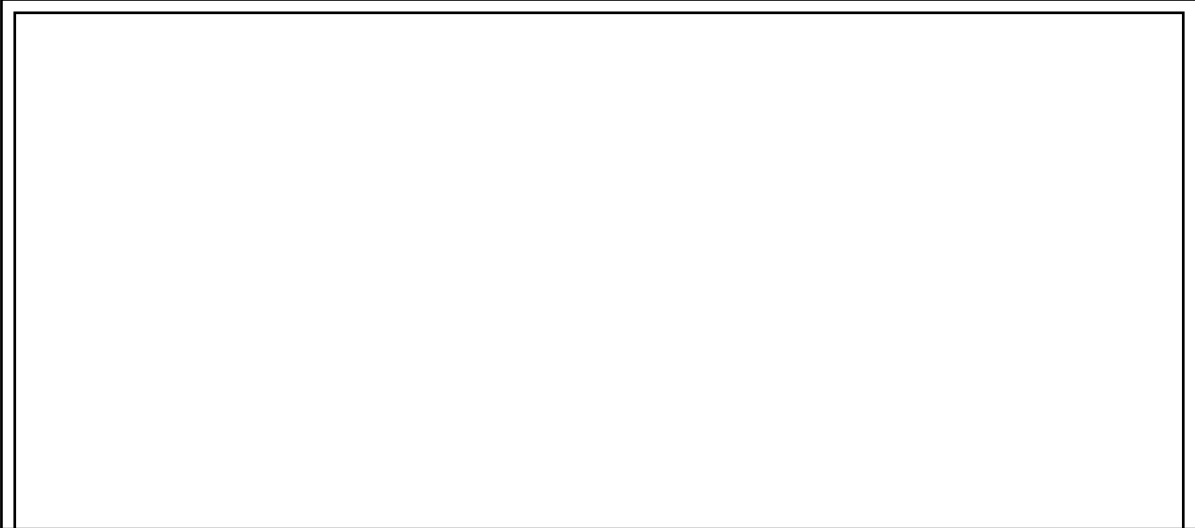
CHBOSKY: Maybe. I had experience. I worked on “Rent” with Spike Lee first and then Chris Columbus. I worked on “Jericho” with Jon Turteltaub and all these journeymen directors who came through. I soaked it up. I also worked with Griffin Dunne and Jay Roach. By the time it was time to do “Perks,” I felt confident because I had observed so much from them.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: We have to talk about music. How did you pick it?

CHBOSKY: It was a combination of a dance between myself and Alexandra Patsavas, our music director. It was a love affair. I brought in my favorites ’80s/’90s. She brought in her favorites ’80s/’90s. Jennifer Nash, our music editor, brought in some stuff. What about this? What about that? How many things did we try before we landed on L7? How many tunnel songs? I loved “Vapour Trail” by Ride and “Sway” by Spiritualized. We tried some Smashing Pumpkins. You name it. We tried Radiohead even though it was a little past our period. And then Alex brings in “Heroes” one day and we were like, “That’s perfect.” What happens in Hollywood is you do a cut and put in all these songs for the test audience. And they’re like, “That’s great. Now that you have a good tone, find the cheap songs.” Well, luckily for us, we had two things going for us. Alexandra and our music clearing people, because “Perks” was a special project, it was “Call in Favors Time.” She would call the licensing people and be like, “This is the special one. You want to be involved.” They would give it to us for a lot less. People wanted to be involved. They would give us a break. When we tested it, the kids loved the movie so much that they didn’t make us scrap it and go for the cheap songs.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: What are the films or fiction that inspired this?

CHBOSKY: Everyone that’s listed in the movie. My favorite author is Stephen King. Paul Rudd’s character was directly influenced by Stewart Stern. He wrote the screenplay for “Rebel without a Cause,” “Sybil,” “The Ugly American,” and more. When I was choosing colleges, he happened to be giving a seminar that day at USC. I was 17. He’s like “When I met James Dean,” and my jaw hit the floor. When I arrived at the school later that semester, he had a massive heart attack. He was recovering in the hospital and I wrote him a letter and made him a mix tape. But I didn’t sign. It was an anonymous letter, kind of like Charlie. It took Stewart a year or a year and a half to figure out who it was. “This feels like Steve Chbosky.” (Laughs.) He’s been my hero and mentor ever since. He’s the first person that read the screenplay for “Perks.”





The Perks of Being a Wallflower
Photo credit: Summit

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Do you ever think what would have happened if you didn't go to that seminar?

CHBOSKY: Oh my God. Life would be completely different. I might have gone to NYU. I might have had a completely different life. When you know what you want, life gives you the right fit. Stuart has been an amazing fit for my life.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: This is a genre that's typically rife with cliches. Did you specifically try to avoid any and how?

CHBOSKY: I went from a place of respect. I wanted to respect what young people actually go through. Funny things, first kisses, first crushes, but also the dark things that kids face. I wanted to balance them. John Malkovich was there for the first couple of weeks of shooting and he pulled me aside after a week and said, "Listen. I love your script. I love it because it has real heart. Because it has heart, you don't need sentiment. Direct this movie like a guy from Pittsburgh. Always get the tough take." That line. It became a bit of a mantra. I would direct the actors. You need a strong director to help the actors. Go do what you need to do and I'll rope you in. And the producers did that with me. They would rope me in. I was smart and I listened to people who made a lot more movies than I did.

"The Perks of Being a Wallflower" is already playing in limited release and opens wide on September 28, 2012.



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