Interview: Director David Gordon Green Crowns 'Prince Avalanche'

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CHICAGO – Director David Gordon Green has created a variety of popular and revered movies – from his breakthrough "George Washington" (2000) to his latest, the uniquely titled "Prince Avalanche." Green's new film features Paul Rudd and Emile Hirsch as two co-workers in a remote environment, trying hard not to get along.

Green is influenced by his Southern roots, having been born in Alabama and raised in Texas. After studying film at the North Carolina School of the Arts, he made his debut with the acclaimed independent feature, writing and directing "George Washington." From there he has adapted and directed serious dramas – "All the Real Girls" (2003) and "Snow Angels" (2007) – and comedies like "Pineapple Express" (2008), "Your Highness" (2011) and "The Sitter" (2011). Green also is a producer and director on the cult HBO comedy series, "Eastbound & Down."

Emile Hirsch and Paul Rudd are Highwaymen in David Gordon Green's 'Prince Avalanche'
Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

"Prince Avalanche" is Green's eighth feature film, an adaptation of an Icelandic film called "Either Way." It is basically a two character drama, sprinkled with goofy laughs. Paul Rudd and Emile Hirsch paint highway lines on a remote road through a recently fire ravaged forest. The combination of isolation, atmosphere and opposing viewpoints have these co-workers moving through several stages in their relationship.

HollywoodChicago.com spoke with David Gordon Green a couple weeks ago, before the release of "Prince Avalanche" this Friday.

HollywoodChicago.com: There were portions of 'Prince Avalanche' that were reminders of 'Beasts of the Southern Wild.' In the process of adapting the screenplay. and putting it to its feet during production, what symbolic elements became apparent to you?

David Gordon Green: I don't know if any overt symbolism was intentional in the design. We definitely had a backdrop that I thought was open to a spiritual and metaphysical opportunity. For example, the scene when the woman is going through the ashes of her home – that

wasn't in the script or designed, but when we met her we felt she was essential to being involved in the film.

After we met her and filmed that sequence, afterward we were curious as to how we could integrate her into the movie, that felt appropriate, so we came up with this other little ghostly appearance. I think it evolved into an ambiguous character dynamic. We were referencing works like 'Waiting for Godot.' This gave a sense of absurdity to the film, but also a strange and almost supernatural backdrop.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since this was adapted from another movie – the 2011 Icelandic film 'Either Way' – which elements of that film are intact within your adaptation, and which elements did you expand upon or alter in your interpretation of that former work?

 Green: The beauty of 'Either Way,' it was a two character piece, and it also had the landscape of rural, barren Iceland as a setting. We wanted to retain that atmosphere, but relocate it, and that's why we chose the haunted environment of a burnt-down forest. It's impossible to walk around through the charred woods and not feel like the ghosts of these dead trees were looking at us, or new trees were trying to break through the ash and be reborn. There was a great power to this relocation, and the setting began to transcend our original material.

The architecture and engineering of the story are the same – it was about line painters on a road. Watching 'Either Way,' there were opportunities that I think the film didn't take, I just wondered about elements like the weekend in which one character is left alone, while another goes into town. In the original film, the character left alone just picks up a fishing pole and fades out, but in our film we wanted to follow him. How would he integrate into the environment when no one was looking?

HollywoodChicago.com: What can you say about the acting and dramatic capabilities regarding Paul Rudd that people wouldn't expect if they just know him from his comic performances or light romances?

 Green: One of the things I was looking forward to was bringing in Paul and looking forward to an unexpected dramatic performance, and then working with Emile [Hirsch], and getting an unexpected comic performance – this contrasts the audience expectations for both of these guys. It makes it feel fresh and unique, and it's the challenge of an actor to play against their type. I do know both Paul and Emile socially and outside their work, and knew both of those elements were apparent in their characters. It was just a matter of bringing it to life.

HollywoodChicago.com: Emile Hirsch and Paul Rudd spent a significant amount of dialogue time together. Since you were the facilitator for that face time, what did you observe about their relationship in real life that helped them with the on-screen relationship?

 Green: Well, their relationship in real life was exactly life their on-screen relationship. [laughs] It wasn't a very sophisticated casting process. I knew I wanted Paul to be a part of it from the get-go. And then I went through my Rolodex and thought, 'who would be the weirdest person to pair up with Paul?' When I got to 'E,' I stopped.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the inspiration for your debut film, 'George Washington'? Was it a particular incident that you encountered or was it a series of observances that you collected?

 Green: The inspiration for making it was local. It was shot in the neighborhood where I was living in Winston-Salem [North Carolina] at the time, and I just met these phenomenal kids who lived there. They were non-actors, but just had these amazingly unique poetic voices, and the location of their lives were simultaneously devastating and beautiful.

I had that as a concept for what I wanted to do in that area. I connected that in the writing process to my own youth, and the frustrations in that youth. I was looking at myself around sixth grade, where I went to a school that was predominantly minority inner-city school in Dallas, Texas. Then when I went to Junior High, all of a sudden race became more evident and prominent, it started to divide people, and it dispersed a bit of my social circle.

Hirsch and Rudd Having a Bit of Fun in 'Prince Avalanche'
Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: And how did that emotion play into 'George Washington'?

Green: One of the subtleties of the film is that I wanted to create a color blind, age blind and economic blind society. Much as it looks like a commentary on poverty, it's very much a utopian designed environment in which we explore dramatic situations.

HollywoodChicago.com: And the source for the title?

Green: The title was…sh*t, I can't even remember. [laughs] It's like the title 'Prince Avalanche,' it seemed like a good idea at the time.

HollywoodChicago.com: You have adapted screenplays and written original screenplays. Which technique requires the most effort, and which one is more easily transitioned into the production process for you as a director?

Green: The adaptations are always easier, for a couple reasons. One is you can plagiarize the good stuff and reinvent anything else with authority. It also gives a credibility to the property because it illustrates something – for example, when I put this movie together I pitched, 'Paul Rudd in a remake of Either Way' and the money was there in 24 hours. It's an easier sales tool. 'Either Way' is not a tremendously valuable property, but it clarifies if you put valuable actors in it, that becomes worthwhile and viable in the marketplace.

I adapted the novel 'Snow Angels' into a movie, and that was an example of condensing and designing it to work in a limited and contained period of time. But it's always a challenge, because you have to sometimes lose and combine characters, yet you have your framework beginning-middle-end, and you can explore and deviate from it. The familiarity and popularity of a source is also an issue, because sometimes the challenge will be, how far will the audience let you stray?

HollywoodChicago.com: You've directed a number of episodes of the HBO original comedy 'Eastbound & Down.' What makes the character of Kenny Powers so fascinating despite his sociopathic nature? What do you think Kenny Powers represents in regard to the average American?

Director David Gordon Green On Set
Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

Green: We had this conversation a couple nights ago, right after I wrapped on the fourth and final season. I directed three of the eight episodes. The anchor of that series, and the character of Kenny, is something indescribable within Danny McBride. Danny can say the most offensive and horrible things, that 99% of actors would be shot down for saying, and he gets away with it because of his inherent charm. It defies reality, wait until you see this season.

HollywoodChicago.com: You were tapped to direct the film adaptation of the legendary novel, 'A Confederacy of Dunces'? What was the obstacle to getting it done, and do you think there is a New Orleans style curse in filming this particular novel?

Green: [Laughs] I think arguably it is among one of the greatest books ever written. It was caught up in a lot of expense, politics and estate rights issues. There is a tremendous financial burden that you have to accept to even get the project going. It's a period piece – which you can do still in New Orleans – but there are the costumes and recreations that are expensive, and that means you need a huge movie stars to play key roles, and Ignatius Reilly is a very specific type of character. It will need the perfect movie star of the right age and right timing to pull it off.

I worked on it for three years, even moved to New Orleans, where I've lived for the last seven years. It was brought to final script form [by Steven Soderbergh and Scott Kramer], I worked on the development and we cast it with pre-'Elf' Will Ferrell as Ignatius. He wasn't a big enough star yet, but then he became 'Will Ferrell, Movie Star' and became inappropriate for Ignatius. It was difficult.

HollywoodChicago.com: If you were like Alfred Hitchcock, and could have made cameos in your films, which one would you like to go back to, and what would the cameo be?

Green: I would have like to be in 'Your Highness,' as the guy in the Minotaur suit. [laughs] A disguised cameo, now that would have been fun.

"Prince Avalanche" continues its limited release in Chicago on August 16th. Featuring Paul Rudd, Emile Hirsch, Lance LeGault and Joyce

Payne. Screenplay adapted and directed by David Gordon Green. Rated "R"

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