

Interview: Three Young Actors Are ‘Me and Earl and the Dying Girl’

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CHICAGO – Every so often, a movie makes a huge splash in the ocean of releases, and “Me and Earl and the Dying Girl” is a prime example. Both the jury winner and the audience favorite at the Sundance Film Festival, the film features Thomas Mann (Me), RJ Cyler (Earl) and Olivia Cooke (Dying Girl) as the title characters.

The film is a celebration of sorts, even though the sword hanging over the proceedings is the Dying Girl. In understanding the feelings the characters have when confronted with a young girl’s demise, there are layers stripping away in their emotions. Director Alfonso-Gomez Rejon also creates an homage to the history of cinema, as the two male characters are film savants. Combine all these elements in an almost symbolic sense, and “Me and Earl and the Dying Girl” is about life itself.



Olivia Cooke, Thomas Mann and RJ Cyler of ‘Me and Earl and the Dying Girl’

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com got the chance to interview the title characters from the movie, three young actors who are both veterans and newcomers to film. Thomas Mann (“It’s Kind of a Funny Story,” “Project X”), RJ Cyler (debut) and Olivia Cooke (TV’s “Bates Motel”) all have achieved the roles of their careers, so far.

HollywoodChicago.com: Thomas, did it ever occur to you, in the context of the film, and as you were formulating your character, that Greg could be symbol for some dying ember of youth, rather than a person in reality?

Thomas Mann: No. I think it is about him shedding his selfish and stubborn childhood ways. As compared to Earl, he is the kid in the relationship. He’s stunting his own growth in a way, and the story is about him sharing himself with others and letting people in.

HollywoodChicago.com: Olivia, your director Alfonso told me that you and he created a chart to make sure that your character Rachel could physically look like the stages of chemotherapy she was going through. How did it feel to take on both the physical and mental characteristics of a dying human?

Olivia Cooke: It was heavy, but my fellow actors and Alfonso protected me, so it never felt like a burden. I wanted to make it as honest and real as possible, and I didn't want to do a disservice to anyone that is actually going through it. I was terrified of false notes, even though I know I'm 'pretending.' So I was meticulous as possible when it came to mentally and physically preparing myself.

HollywoodChicago.com: RJ, it was obvious that Earl came from a different social, economic and race component in Pittsburgh than Greg. Besides their love of film, what did you decide when formulating the character, regarding how Greg and Earl maintained their friendship beyond their common love of films and filmmaking?

RJ Cyler: In my head, Greg is a bit of an alter-ego to Earl, but Earl had to grow up faster – and only has his brother – and Greg had a different childhood. They were from different sides of the fence, but they needed each other to complete themselves.

For example, Greg had to learn from Earl about how to mature, and Earl had to learn from Greg how to soften up and let people in, beyond the barriers he puts up. They have been friends from kindergarten to now, which helped put Earl in a place where he could tell Greg how he really felt near the end of the film. It was important that their friendship had been in place that long.

HollywoodChicago.com: Thomas, it is said that film actors take a piece of each production, and use that piece as a performance chip throughout their whole career. What did you get from ‘Me and Earl...’ that you believe will apply to you in your upcoming career?

Mann: I learned to trust myself as an actor. I was anxious going into the project, knowing that there would be many days where I would have to deliver emotionally, and there is no guarantee that I would be there on those days. So it was about learning to open myself up and trusting the other actors and director.

What I realized is that when you believe in the story, and the writing speaks to you, then that is enough. You don't have to necessarily apply a sad thing in your own life, if you just empathize with the character. That's what I found worked best, I immersed myself into their world, and by the time I got to the real emotional scenes, just my interaction with Rachel's character got me to the right emotional space.



RJ Cyler and Thomas Mann Share a Scene with Nick Offerman in ‘Me and Earl and the Dying Girl’

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: Olivia, you've had a remarkable rise in a very short time to the ranks of now-movie star. What key moment in the last ten years do you think was the turning point for the girl from Manchester England, to this interview room in Chicago?

Cooke: Probably just being alone for four months in my apartment in Vancouver, when I was 18 years old. It was the first time I'd been away from home, from 'across the pond,' and realizing there were sacrifices that I had to make – it was at a make-or-break point. I was so miserable, so lonely and had no friends. I was just doing two scenes for 'Bates Motel' twice a week, and didn't really know how to cook or look after myself. I thought to myself, 'did I really want to do this as a career?' It came down to the rewards and challenging myself towards the payoff, in the end.

HollywoodChicago.com: RJ, In your biography, it says that you asked your family to relocate to Los Angeles to facilitate an acting career. How has this helped you so far, and what was their reaction to you portraying a totally different person named Earl?

Cyler: First, yes my Mom and Dad did move with me, and we were comfortable in Jacksonville, Florida. So when they agreed to move, it made me more hungry to do something, it lit a flame. My family had cashed in their lives to move to Los Angeles, for a dream that is most of the time far-fetched. Well guess what, I’m crazy enough to chase it.

When they saw me on the screen as Earl, they told me they didn’t know who that was. [laughs] I told them, ‘it’s me, I promise.’ Earl can’t grow facial hair, RJ can’t grow facial hair. My Mom was surprised, she didn’t think I could be serious. Whatever!

HollywoodChicago.com: Thomas, since you are 23 years old now, what does a transition role look like to you in kind of shedding portraying a teenager, and now portraying a young adult, whether you are in the midst of it now, or hope to play in the near future?

Mann: It’s weird because I’ve been playing 17 years old for about six years now. I’ve gotten to the point where I’m reading these scripts and they don’t resonate anymore. Either that, or I’ve done those beats before in other films. There was nothing left for me to grab onto.

But ‘Me and Earl...’ was different. It was so honest and meaty, and I knew I could sink my teeth into it, and it was different from those other scripts I’d been reading. It didn’t shy away from any emotions, and it was so funny, which in turn made the emotional beats more earned. I respected the writing in the way it owned up to the more unsavory parts of his character. And since this is my quintessential high-school-coming-of-age movie, I have to move on.

HollywoodChicago.com: Olivia, what did you observe about American teenage girls that you found different than British culture, and how did you add that to your character of Rachel?



Thomas Mann, RJ Cyler & Olivia Cooke in Chicago

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Cooke: Rachel was just different, she was already set aside from a typical American teenager – she was quietly confident and really liked herself. I feel like with all teenagers these days there is such a culture – with the internet and shared entertainment – there is really not much variation between British and American teenagers. Rachel is just set apart, and it was good to play her with no insecurities or typical teenage angst. She was much older than she was in actual age.

HollywoodChicago.com: Which note in vocalization did you have to hit to get your American accent right?

Cooke: You have to hit your ‘R’s’ really hard, which most English-to-American accents do. [Thomas Mann interrupts her]. Shut up, Thomas.

Mann: Well, you told me that I couldn’t do a Manchester accent. I can!

Cooke: You’ve never done it.

Mann: Just because I haven’t done it, doesn’t mean I can’t. Obviously, she thinks her American accent is perfect.

Cooke: No, I don’t.

Mann: I mean, your accent is amazing, it’s really good!

Cooke: F**k you. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: [Laughs] I’m going to get a bit serious here. RJ, as someone who might be affected by the latest police difficulties in African American communities and circumstances, what is your opinion regarding the sometimes pre-judgment that African American males

receive in your age group by law enforcement?

Cyler: Of course stereotyping is very serious, and common. I’ve been in those situations, where I’ve been stopped, and it’s just in way you have to approach it. I know that some people have quick tempers, I’m the opposite. I usually say, ‘okay, officer, I understand you’re having a bad day.’ If I handle it that way, it’s better.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did your father ever have to talk to you about it?

Cyler: Him and my Mom taught me and my brothers common sense – anger never makes happiness. Encountering an officer who is obviously tense, it’s not a good idea to challenge that situation. My Dad always said, ‘don’t do anything stupid.’

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally for all of you ... give me one word that defines your experience on the film, and define that word in context on how you feel about it?

Cooke: ‘Empathetic.’ I think in general I’m a very empathizing person, but this film teaches everyone – of all ages – to share beyond our digital age. Just to connect to people to converse, to share and to be empathetic.

Mann: ‘Create.’ I hope this movie inspires people to create something. To open up, if you have a talent that needs to be revealed.

Cyler: ‘Appreciation.’ One the main components of this film is appreciation. I learned to appreciate a lot of things just by participating in this film, and seeing the outcome. I’m very much more appreciative of even the smaller things in life.

“Me and Earl and the Dying Girl” has a limited release, including Chicago, on June 12th. Featuring Thomas Mann, RJ Cyler, Olivia Cooke, Nick Offerman, Molly Shannon and Connie Britton. Written by Jesse Andrews, from his novel. Directed by Alonso Gomez-Rejon. Rated “PG-13”



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [17]
Writer, Editorial Coordinator
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [16]

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