

Interview: Director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon of 'Me and Earl and the Dying Girl'

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CHICAGO – In my second meeting with director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, I was struck by his almost child-like wonder regarding his breakout film, “Me and Earl and the Dying Girl.” Gomez-Rejon bleeds celluloid, and loves films in every fiber of his being. To be able to contribute to the cinema universe is his greatest reward.

The film came out of the Sundance festival with the top jury prize and audience favorite awards, much as its predecessor “Whiplash” has done in 2014. The poignant film, about the effect a dying classmate has on a movie loving boy, is done almost as an allegory in so many aspects. Its success is a testament to director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, who has worked his way upward in the film industry for years, under the auspice of mentors such as Martin Scorsese, Nora Ephron and Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu.



Director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon On Set for 'Me and Earl and the Dying Girl'

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

Gomez-Rejon talked to HollywoodChicago.com, a few weeks before the June 12th release of “Me and Earl and the Dying Girl,” and provided insight to his movie life and what the film means for his career and journey.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, become a character in the film, as Greg, Earl and Rachel interacted through it?

Alfonso Gomez-Rejon: I didn't know the city of Pittsburgh, except that it was being considered as the setting for the film. When I scouted the city, I fell in love with it, and opened it up as a character by setting up scenes in many different locations, to take advantage of it.

For example, I discovered accidentally, through Thelma Schoonmaker [Martin Scorsese's film editor], that she had worked in Pittsburgh after she edited the film “Woodstock,” doing a documentary about Supreme Court justices, and worked in the same building as where they

produced 'Mister Roger's Neighborhood.' She connected me with Betty Seamans, who used to write and act on the show. It turned out that Seamans' son had a record store on Polish Hill. I checked it out, and in the same building there was a store called Copacetic Comics, which also sold DVDs. That became the store, after we dressed it up, that Greg and Earl would find their films in a way that I had found films in New York City, under the categories of directors.

HollywoodChicago.com: What about the city was cinematic?

Gomez-Rejon: It was about embracing the city, but not in a cliché way. I used the hills and verticality to stage sequences, looking up and down. There were many houses I was considering for the characters, especially Rachel, and I found her house on Murray Hill Avenue, with that beautiful silhouette. Earl's house in Braddock had a distinct style – it was actually [source novelist and screenwriter] Jesse Andrews parent's house. The production designer kept saying 'how can we find a house that looks like Jesse's house?' We finally just ended up using it.

And then there was Schenley High School, the same school that [Pittsburgh native] Andy Warhol and Jesse both attended. That school was a character. At first I was nervous about a high school setting and those scenes – I didn't want to make it a 'high school' movie. When we went into Schenley it had been closed and abandoned for five years. It looked like Chernobyl, it was completely filthy, but I knew we had to use it. We had to clean and light it, but it worth embracing that part of Pittsburgh.



RJ Cyler (left) and Thomas Mann (right) Share a Scene with Nick Offerman in 'Me and Earl and the Dying Girl'

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you get to the Andy Warhol Museum while you were there?

Gomez-Rejon: Of course, and there was a spiritual story associated with that. I went there with my prop master the weekend before we wrapped shooting. They had a display of the Warhol screen tests from his movie period, and that became the inspiration for the final film-within-the-film. We figured of course Greg and Earl would have been exposed to the Warhol stuff, as local filmmakers.

HollywoodChicago.com: The adults are remarkable and different in this story, as well as the way you cast the particular roles. What was the key to casting the right players in those roles?

Gomez-Rejon: All the adult characters are eccentric in their own way, but very human, and very real. Connie [Britton] was the perfect mother for Greg, and Nick [Offerman] really took to his eccentric Sociology Professor with tenure, but you believe his trip. He starts out as aloof and goofy, but then you see the close-up as his son skips school, and there is a weight to how his eyes react. I cast actors who could effortlessly go from comedy to drama, without making caricatures of them.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is obviously a movie about movies, with many references and side journeys along the way. What is your favorite tribute or satire to a movie in the story, and with so many mentors in your own career, who do you honor?

Gomez-Rejon: Before I worked with Martin Scorsese as his intern and assistant, he changed my life with his films. In the 1980s, as I was growing up in Laredo, Texas, they spoke to me deeply. Every decision I made was because of 'Mean Streets,' and how it affected me. I went to New York University because of him, and three years later ended up interning for him. His taking a chance on me led to Nora Ephron, and afterward that led from one to another. This film was an opportunity to give thanks to them, not through an email, letter or in person, but through the movie itself – which also was a love letter to my father.

HollywoodChicago.com: So where are the main tributes hidden in the film?

Gomez-Rejon: There are key details in Greg's bedroom that are the main tributes. There are two film posters, 'Mean Streets' and 'The 400 Blows.' On Greg's desk are two scripts – 'Casino' and 'Heartburn' – those are by Nicholas Pileggi and Nora Ephron. His screen saver shows Thelma Schoonmaker. Around the room are tributes to the 'Archers' logo [Filmmakers Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger] and the first edition of 'Scorsese on Scorsese,' the book that changed my life. That's me, showing my love to them.

HollywoodChicago.com: The images that you chose in the film-within-the-film that is made for the Dying Girl near the end – at what point in your process did you realize what images you were about to use, and did any of them change in post production?

Gomez-Rejon: I knew I wanted the actors to interact with that film from the beginning, and that happened because it was the last scene we did in the film. We talked about 'green screen' to add it in later, but ultimately I wanted it to be a character. Originally, it was a montage of the parody movies that he and Earl had made over the years, but it changed because I needed to give it a shape. It's was so abstract, that I couldn't really contain it, it is an abstract idea.

It's about color and line, and a different interpretation of the non-literal. When I pitched the idea to the producers, I almost thought I was going to be fired, because of the abstract idea. But they embraced it because my pitch to them was that the Dying Girl was becoming an energy. The film began with something literal, and then became a feeling I wanted to express. That was the only shape I could give it.

HollywoodChicago.com: So what is the breakdown on how the film-within-a-film changed?



Director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon in Chicago
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Gomez-Rejon: It started as parody, and all the student testimonials were going to be deconstructed, but that didn't work. So it goes back to that story I told previously about going to the Warhol museum. Then I added a Charles and Ray Eames inspired short film, because Greg and Earl had made a film based on their 'Kaleidoscope Jazz Chair' with pillows, and then the narrative would go into something more abstract. That was the journey. It was animated by Ed Bursch and Nate Marsh, and that was the conversation we had in pre-production, hand painting 16mm film in the style of [non-narrative filmmaker] Stan Brakhage. We kept going with it until the film was completed, the morning of the final scene. I broke down when I saw it, because it fit within the context of the bigger film. This was my film for them, and this was Greg's film for her.

HollywoodChicago.com: You indicated to me in our last interview that everything started to click creatively at a certain point in shooting 'Me and Earl...' How does that feeling a creative satisfaction compare when up against thousands of people coming up to you and telling you how great the film is or how great you are?

Gomez-Rejon: You have to understand that I just turned 42 years old, and I had wanted to be a film director since I was 12. So it has been a very slow journey, slightly uphill, which was better than the opposite direction. [laughs] Thelma Schoonmaker was also a late bloomer, and she always said, 'the one thing about late bloomers is that your work may have longevity because of it.'

Because I had absorbed so much by the time I got to shooting this film, and because I knew so much about film history – and how great that is – and I know I have a long way to go to achieve anything that could potentially stand the test of time, that I don't believe much of the praise. I know that the process of making the film was one of love, for my cast and crew. I've done it all on a film set, so I appreciate every job. I 'cast' the crew as carefully as I cast the actors, because one bad seed can affect the energy.

HollywoodChicago.com: How is the publicity tour process?

Gomez-Rejon: [Laughs] I’ve never done it before, and it’s very surreal, but I care about the film so much that I want people to see it, so I’m glad to talk about it. Sundance was a bit of a slap in the face, because now I have to talk it, and I am an introvert. In this process, I have become more comfortable talking about the film, and I’m learning more about myself.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you have the particular credit of ‘Second Unit Director’ on so many interesting and even Oscar winning films, what is the process of assigning duties to a Second Unit Man, and what characterizes great Second Unit work in a completed film?

Gomez-Rejon: I can give the example of Ed and Nate, animating those sequences for that film we spoke about. It trust as much as anything, and you need that good eye. Every director wants control over every element of their film, but there is simply a restriction of resources and time.

I love the job of creating inserts, because you need someone who can capture what you want. Even though I was doing significant television direction, Nora Ephron called me in to do food inserts for ‘Julia and Julia.’ Of course I did, I’d do anything for her. Think about it, she trusted me with shooting a chicken. [laughs] When you feel that trust, it’s like you have a duty not to let them or the film down.

HollywoodChicago.com: I think everybody who has a love of film has certain go-to films that soothe their soul in times of creative or moral crisis. What are your go-to films in this context?

Gomez-Rejon: You asked, and I can probably give you a list that goes on forever, but I’ll start with ‘The Weight’ sequence in ‘The Last Waltz,’ Scorsese’s short film ‘Life Lessons’ in ‘New York Stories,’ ‘The 400 Blows’ in its entirety, and the last reel of ‘Kundun.’

“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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