

Interview: 'Me and Earl and the Dying Girl' Director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon at 2015 Chicago Critics Film Festival

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CHICAGO – It was a helluva festival. The third annual 2015 Chicago Critics Film Festival (CCFF) presented films to packed houses, and also featured the stars and the directors from those films. Closing night on May 7th featured “Me and Earl and the Dying Girl,” directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon.

Winning both the Jury Prize and Audience Favorite Award at the recent Sundance Film Festival, “Me and Earl...” is a stylish fable about a high school Senior named Greg (Thomas Mann), his film making buddy Earl (Ronald Cyler II), and their mutual classmate, a dying girl named Rachel (Olivia Cooke). Directed with confidence and verve by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, the film continued its run of praise at the CCFF.



CCFF Closing Night Film, 'Me and Earl and the Dying Girl'

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com interviewed director Gomez-Rejon on Closing Night, and gained insight into his artistic point of view.

HollywoodChicago.com: Producer Dan Fogelman told me that they needed to get the original author of the source novel, Jesse Andrews, to learn to write the screenplay. What was your involvement in making sure Jesse's voice was true to his book?

Alfonso Gomez-Rejon: Dan was the person that nurtured Jesse through the process, because he had never written a screenplay. By the time I got the screenplay, it was pretty much all there. I just had to shape it, and make it into a film we could afford to shoot. The third act changed a bit, but Dan deserves all the credit for working with Jesse.

HollywoodChicago.com: When did you feel that the production clicked into gear, in the sense that you knew you could make something special out of what you were shooting?

Gomez-Rejon: I think in pre-production, the energy around the film offices was just great. Molly Shannon called it an 'arts and crafts camp,' because everyone was always making something to put in the film. Cutting felt, making high school banners, and all the handmade quality that went into the film. It was very intimate, and people were involved there to make a movie.

The next 'click' was probably the first day we shot, with the three main young actors together – the first scene we shot was the 'ice cream shop steps' part. It was very simple, with no artificial lighting. But I was nervous, because it was going to be the first time all three of them were together in a scene. It turned out the chemistry was right, the rhythm was right and all three of them felt like they knew each other. Then it came back to me to 'screw it up.' [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: What is your method for handling actors? At what point do you step in to reel a performance in, when it doesn't jibe with your vision?

Gomez-Rejon: That's a conversation that starts way before shooting. It can start as far away as the audition process. In Olivia's case, she auditioned these big scenes over and over again, with Thomas Mann. When we got further down the line, we didn't even need to talk about those scenes any more.

We talked mostly about the characters in the abstract. Olivia and I kept a chart on Rachel's character, in the phases of chemotherapy she was going through, just to make sure she could react physically to that treatment – it was mapped out. By the time we're on set, we've been talking about the film and characters for months, so it all becomes about trust, and providing a set that's a creative space. As for me, I want also to make sure that everyone is making the same movie.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your composition is notable, in the sense that I can tell you take care in camera movement and positioning. How did that style develop?

Gomez-Rejon: I love the camera, and used it in the same way as a TV director on 'American Horror Story' and my first little-seen feature film, 'The Town That Dreaded Sundown.' Those two projects allowed me to experiment with a very baroque filmmaking. I do love to push the camera, but for 'Me and Earl...' I also needed stillness. There was opportunity for composition, though, and I would take that opportunity. There is a thrill in finding the right tone.



Director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon of 'Me and Earl and the Dying Girl'
Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: You've mentored as an associate in various positions for Martin Scorsese, Nora Ephron, Robert De Niro and Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu. Which of those filmmakers or actors keeps coming up when you want to be inspired about constructing a particular scene?

Gomez-Rejon: Scorsese. All of life's questions are answered in Martin Scorsese movies. Because his films grow with you – from who you were when you first saw them to how you feel about them when you see them when you're older – they operate at several different levels. I always go back to him because not only has he worked in every genre, but every time you read about him, he references the master filmmakers that came before him. It's very humbling.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did Marty see 'Me and Earl... '?

Gomez-Rejon: Yes, because I needed his permission. I used excerpts from his film history documentary twice, and I needed him to sign off on it. He was very happy about the film, and very proud once we started winning awards.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, you won the jury and audience awards at the Sundance Film Festival. What does that honor mean to you and the team that brought this film to life?

Gomez-Rejon: Most of the production team flew out to Sundance, from all over the country. After the screening, we all ended up at this bar, and the first review came up, and it was a Variety review. That can make or break a film at our level. It was positive, and the Hollywood Reporter, minutes later, was positive, there were a lot of tears. The crew killed themselves for the film, and maybe we thought it had a future, and maybe people were going to see this movie, and maybe there was hope.

We filmmakers always want to leave something behind that lasts, and this perhaps is the beginning of that journey. But more than anything it felt like everyone's work paid off, not just my work, but everybody on that production.

For more information about the recently completed 2015 Chicago Critics Film Festival [click here](#). [18]



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