

Film Close-Up: Emile Hirsch

by Joey_Berlin

"Speed Racer" should turbo-boost the visibility of its talented star, Emile Hirsch. A stylistically bold adaptation of the classic '60s cartoon, the loud, fast and computer-enhanced film stars Hirsch as the white-knuckled speed demon who has high-octane fuel in his family bloodline. In fact, his given name actually is Speed Racer. The Wachowski brothers channeled their action and effects expertise from "The Matrix" movies into this whiplash-paced, kid-friendly film, which co-stars Christina Ricci, John Goodman and Susan Sarandon.

EMILE HIRSCH - Emile Hirsch is a white-knuckled speed demon in the action movie 'Speed Racer.' CNS Photo courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures. And Hirsch holds it all together in the title role. The likeable and charismatic 23-year-old Californian came from a showbiz family, breaking into acting with small roles in television at age 11. His first film was "The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys" with Jodie Foster, followed by "The Emperor's Club" with Kevin Kline. Last year, there was Oscar buzz for Hirsch after his remarkable performance as a smart college student turned mountain man in Sean Penn's film "Into the Wild."

Hirsch will next appear with Penn in "Milk," a biopic of murdered gay-rights activist Harvey Milk.

Q: So much of the visuals in "Speed Racer" are computer-generated. Were you in a real car for much of the filming?

A: When I was filming in Europe, I didn't get behind the wheel of a car the entire time. It was all green screen. It was crazy. I mean, it was like being in warehouses with green walls everywhere, and imagining this whole fantasy world around you. It was a challenge. It was a mental challenge.

Q: Was it like going back to the bare basics of dramatic acting, or was it just a pain?

A: Well, that is a pain. You know, it's a sacrifice you make, but then you finally see the finished product and you're like, "Wow, that looks amazing." Little did you know, when the actors made it, it was the exact opposite of a stimulating image. It was a non-stimulating image.

Q: You are used to playing well-developed characters, sometimes based on real people. But how important is having a back story when you are playing a cartoon character?

A: Oh, it's absolutely not important at all (laughs). I think that it was more about getting his vibe down. You know, the back story is actually fairly well described in the script, so that was there. But it was more about getting down what kind of vibe Speed has. What kind of guy is he? He's a really sweet-natured, cooler-than-cool kind of guy who's very by-the-book in a lot of ways. He's not into cheaters. He likes things done the right way, and he's got certain morals that he's not willing to compromise no matter what.

Q: In real life, what kind of driver are you? Are you a speedster or do you play it safe?

A: I'm pretty safe, actually. Sorry to disappoint you.

Q: How did you like doing those martial arts moves?

A: It was very fun to go through the martial arts training with the stunt coordinators. Those guys are tough. They really put me through the wringer with the training and such. I mean, you get tired after you finish an hour of punching and kicking with them. And I didn't want to hit them. That was their problem, because I was like, "I don't want to hurt these guys. They're just doing their job, and they want me to punch them in the stomach? They don't have pads on or anything." And maybe I was giving myself too much credit for how much force I had in a blow. But eventually they'd start doing things like, we'd be sparring and they'd slap me a little bit, like, "Come on! Hit me!" And I'd be like, "No, no." And they'd hit me again, and again, and finally I'd actually punch them. And they were like, "Good. Good!"

Q: It is rare for an actor to be in both a critically acclaimed drama and a big blockbuster so close together. Which direction would you like to head in the future?

A: I don't know. I hope to just read a wonderful script and to do it. There's not much to it other than that, I suppose. I mean, I could pontificate, but I'll resist. I never thought that I would do "Into the Wild" and I never thought that I would do "Speed Racer." I had no idea that either of those projects would ever come along. That's always how it is though, when you're acting. It's one of those things where you're always out of a job. Then you get one and you're working all the time, then you're done and you don't have a job again. You're legitimately out of work. You have no prospects and you never know what's going to come along.

Q: How did "Speed Racer" come along?

A: All of a sudden I got a call and it was like, "They're making 'Speed Racer.'" And I said, "They're making 'Speed Racer?'" That's awesome! Who's going to direct it?" My manager Sam goes, "Well, the Wachowski brothers just committed to directing it." I was like, "Are you joking me? That is the craziest thing I've ever heard!" As soon as I heard that, I was like, "I would love to be in that film."

Q: Are they going to have an action figure of you as Speed Racer?

A: Oh yeah! I look like Dennis Quaid in my action figure, actually, circa '95. Which is a good thing. That's an upgrade for me.

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