

Appropriately enough, actor had to survive 'Wild' role

by James Hebert

BEVERLY HILLS, Calif. - Draped sideways across an armchair, his legs protruding and pretzeled at strange angles, Emile Hirsch looks like a yogi who has just been blown over backward, perhaps by an especially potent blast of wisdom.

SURVIVOR - Emile Hirsch takes on the physically demanding role of Christopher McCandless in 'Into the Wild.' CNS Photo courtesy of Chuck Zlotnick. Though he appears serene (or maybe just sleepy), Hirsch's puzzle-piece pose seems appropriate for an actor who, in his latest movie role, inhabits a kind of human riddle.

Hirsch portrays Christopher McCandless in "Into the Wild," a film directed and written by Sean Penn and based on the true story of a troubled but idealistic young adventurer who met his match in Alaska. It opens Oct. 5.

"He had the courage to step outside the boundaries that so many of us feel confined by," Hirsch describes McCandless, whose story was told in Jon Krakauer's best-selling 1996 book of the same title.

"He gained this kind of amazing knowledge from it, but he had to pay the ultimate price."

There were times Hirsch wondered whether he might get rung up on that same cosmic cash register during the eight-month shoot, which took him to remote locations in Alaska, the Grand Canyon and various deserts.

The odyssey, which retraced McCandless' travels during the last two years of his life, included close encounters with swollen rivers and toothsome wildlife - not to mention a ruthless director (although Penn did perform some of the same feats as Hirsch to help him through rough spots).

"Considering the sheer number of activities I was doing where I could've really gotten hurt, if not killed, I definitely felt like I was very lucky - from the bears to the rapids to the slippery cliffs with 250-foot drops on either side," recalls Hirsch, who at 22 is two years younger than McCandless when he died.

And yet "it was so exhilarating at times," Hirsch says - particularly the months spent in Alaska, a place whose vibe Penn described to Hirsch as "nature on steroids."

"It would be so hard on your mind and body, but at the same time, my spirit would be soaring," Hirsch says, his eyes brightening at the memory.

"You're just so enthralled by the land. It gives you energy - the sights, the ground, the dirt. It gives you spunk. Even if you're tired, you're just, like, full of life."

Hirsch could be channeling McCandless himself in that rapture for wild spaces.

A devotee of Henry David Thoreau and Jack London, McCandless hit the road shortly after graduating from Emory University in 1990. Taking the fanciful name Alexander Supertramp, he gave away \$25,000 in savings to charity and dropped off the map, leaving his family no clue as to where he had gone.

For two years, McCandless wandered from Arizona to Mexico to South Dakota to California, making a few friends and doing odd jobs along the way. But his ultimate goal was always Alaska, and in April 1992, he hitched a ride to the head of the Stampede Trail, left most of his remaining possessions with the driver and strode into the bush.

His aim, as McCandless wrote in copious journals, was to "kill the false being within" - to purify himself from the corruptions of materialism and society by fending for himself in the wild.

Almost five months later, his emaciated body was discovered in an old bus used as a hunters' shelter. McCandless left a brave farewell note and a few unexposed photos in his camera, chilling testament to his final days.

Since then, McCandless has become a conflicted symbol - of romantic heroism to some, of plain foolhardiness to others. Penn's film, moving in its portrait of McCandless' passion and principles, is almost entirely sympathetic but gives occasional glimpses of this tragic seeker's lapses in judgment.

In some scenes, Hirsch's wrist glints with a big gold watch. It actually belonged to McCandless; Jim Gallien, the local who drove McCandless to the trail head, gave the timepiece to Hirsch to wear.

It served as a kind of protective talisman for the actor, but it also seems to convey a sense of McCandless' inability to shed the trappings of civilization completely.

"I think that's a very interesting point, actually," Hirsch says. "The idea that if he's such this mountain man, why does he wear this kind of immaculate gold watch when he's in the middle of nature.

"I think part of that speaks to the contradictory nature of McCandless."

Though he doesn't much resemble the movie's subject on first glance, Hirsch earned the role after Penn saw him in "Lords of Dogtown," the 2005 film that dramatized the lives of Stacy Peralta, Tony Alva (now of Oceanside) and other '70s skateboard pioneers. (Penn narrated Peralta's earlier documentary take, "Dogtown and Z-Boys.")

"I love the physical roles, I love physical acting, and that was a challenge on 'Dogtown,'" says Hirsch, who played the fiery Jay Adams. "And I think the physical challenge on 'Dogtown' helped me on 'Into the Wild'" - as did extensive weight training for "Alpha Dog," released last year.

"So when this came along, which required just so much more of that, it wasn't out of the blue. I had a foundation to start with."

A different kind of challenge involved dealing with the hopes and emotions of McCandless' family, who cooperated with the movie even though it portrays the parents harshly at times.

"It was really important," Hirsch says. "I knew that me walking through the door to meet the family, I was going to seem like an actor no matter what I did. So it was just the commitment to tread very lightly and respect them.

"It was just, 'I know this is hard. You can tell me whatever you want; I'll be supportive. You can tell me nothing, and I'll (still) be supportive.' And I think we kind of got to it. But they'll never fully have a comfort zone with (their son's loss)."

A highlight for Hirsch was his richly textured interplay with Hal Holbrook, who plays a grandfatherly loner befriended by McCandless. "I don't even know the word to describe him because he's so majestic," Hirsch says of the acting icon. "He's a magical presence."

And along with all the physical feats, which included losing 41 pounds for the film's final scenes, Hirsch bobs and weaves with Penn's very busy structure - the film pinballs back and forth between numerous time periods, not shot in sequence.

"You know, you just try to grasp the situation as best you can, and get the timeline as solidly as you can in your head, and then move forward," Hirsch says. "You don't try to overthink it, but you know - don't forget it, either.

"Keep your intuitiveness going. But don't be a fool."

Sound counsel for anyone trying to keep his head above water - figuratively and otherwise.

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