

A chat with ‘Greetings from the Shore’ director Greg Chwerchak

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An interesting window into the entertainment industry: One day Greg Chwerchak helped direct a hip-hop video with some guy that he had just met.

The song was by a little hip-hop group known as The Wu Tang Clan. Little did he know, Greg would come out of that project as MTV and BET’s go-to guy for music video concepts.

From Ludacris to Britney Spears, Greg would go on to write more than 1,600 music videos over five years. But what we’re really here to talk about is his ’80s-style coming-of-age film “Greetings From The Shore.”

The “Sixteen Candles”-influenced, feel-good film was chosen over thousands of other films from across the globe to be Temecula Valley Film Festival’s opening-night feature. Not bad for his first full-length film.

Andrew Reeder: What’s it like being chosen for opening night film?

Greg Chwerchak: This my first feature, so to be selected for the opening night film is a prestigious honor. We just finished filming, so everything is coming so fast and furious. I’m excited for my lead actor and lead actress [David Fumero and Kim Shaw]. It is all three of our first features. And they are both from New York, so they get to see the country. We just got back from Montreal Film Festival a couple days ago in time for the screening in Temecula and then there’s a festival in Big Bear on 14th and 15th, and then we are back here Sunday and then it’s off to Boston.

AR: What is an indie film?

GC: People make films and finance them independently in hopes of making it into a festival because that’s their only chance for exposure. If films are made through a studio they already have distribution in place. The festivals were created to provide a venue for the films with no distribution. That’s why festival films are called independent because they are made without a large studio backing them. So indie films can be a great way to tell stories that the studios don’t want to touch but sometimes they can alienate the audience with uncomfortable subjects or push the envelope a bit far.

AR: How does your movie fit into that?

GC: We took a really, really cliché genre, a coming-of-age film, like “Sixteen Candles” or “The Breakfast Club,” and said let’s take this and make it more complex, stir the pot a little bit with some interesting characters that have a lot of depth and complexity and tell a good story. We wanted to tell stories that appeal to the audience but still have the originality and layers of an indie film. Everyone likes feel-good movies about real life and coming of age.

AR: Tell me about your lead actress.

GC: We cast her right out of drama school, and it’s funny because the whole movie lives and dies with her. Its like Jennifer Grey in “Dirty Dancing.” She is the film and she just knocks it out of the ballpark.

AR: Isn’t that kind of scary, putting a first-timer into that position?

GC: Yes, but she went up against 500 other girls, a lot of them with much more experience.

AR: Five hundred?

GC: Yeah, there are not many complex roles in New York for an 18- to 21-year-old, so everyone sent their girls over. We had girls that had worked on Broadway, movies, TV, you’d be surprised how many 20-year-old actresses there are in Manhattan that have been working 10 years already. But she had this natural energy; she wasn’t jaded; she had this freshness; it is a coming-of-age movie so that’s what we were looking for.

AR: And your actor?

GC: Definitely less a risk with David Fumero; he’s in front of the camera every day with his show “One Life to Live” so he’s very comfortable in front of the lens.

AR: What was it like working with Paul Sorvino?

GC: Well I have done one movie, he’s done over a hundred, so I had a lot to learn from him. But one of the things he said that was really interesting was that out of all the films he has been in, this is the first time he’s ever played himself as a character. He said he took one look at the script and said, “This is me.”

He plays a father [in the movie] and one of the things he’s famous for is crying at the 1995 Academy Awards when his daughter [Mira Sorvino] won. That’s who he is. He really loves his kids, he’s a sculptor, he’s a farmer, just a real guy, when he came to the set everyone sat up a little bit straighter.

AR: What did you learn from him?

GC: To let the movement of scenes unfold organically, to let the actors move around and have their space until they can get comfortable. He is really into authenticity and honesty, I come from a

writing background, so to get those tidbits from the point of view from an experienced actor is invaluable.

AR: Is there a strong tendency to micromanage your actors?

GC: Oh sure, with every director. The director visualizes what a scene looks like and then as a writer I'm thinking of how I am going to shoot it. You start with all these pre-conceived ideas of what it's going to look like, but on set we have a great term for that called "happy accidents" and it's where something weird happens on set and it's beautiful, sometimes things happen you don't plan for and they work

AR: Tell us about your work as a hip-hop music video director.

GC: The bulk of my music video work I did as a writer. I would write concepts for other people to direct. Sometimes I would direct myself but not usually. So for four to five years I was MTV and BET's go-to guy for music videos. The way it usually worked was I would get a song from a label and then the producer would call me and say here are the parameters: Ludacris wants to shoot in Atlanta and he wants to shoot a love story. And then what I would do is listen to the song on repeat over and over until after awhile certain aspects of the song and vocabulary would rise to the front of my mind and that's where the concept would begin. And I did that for 1,600 videos and 65 directors over five years. The whole time it felt like pages of days flying off the calendar, like how you see in movies. Every morning I would wake up and my voice mail would be full of new music. I was usually working on two to three videos a day

AR: How did you get into it?

GC: It's funny, I met this director at a party and he had just transitioned to hip-hop videos and he needed someone to help him come up with ideas. It wasn't even a job that existed before I started doing it, kind of like how there are so many different types of screen writers now, it's an insider sort of thing I guess. So I started working with this director on our first video which was for the Wu Tang Clan and after that the calls just kept coming. I'd have guys calling me all day long and then from different time zones, so it would be all through the night too. I'd feel like a drug dealer sometimes with these nameless voices calling me in the middle of the night asking me if I'm the guy. I'm like, "What guy?" "The video guy." Oh yeah.