



KARINA TAIRA/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES

After compelling turns in *Lords Of Dogtown* and *Alpha Dog*, indie alumni **Emile Hirsch** comes of age – and hits A-list overdrive – with *Into The Wild* and *Speed Racer*...

MAN ON FIRE

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SEATED IN A SUMPTUOUS HOTEL ROOM IN Toronto, where 22-year-old actor Emile Hirsch is ensconced at the city's film festival initiating the publicity crusade for *Into The Wild*, his hair still dyed jet-black for the just-wrapped *Speed Racer*, you can sense in his penetrating gaze the same thirst for no-limits adventure that drives his character to the very limits of endurance. The role of real-life wilderness man Chris McCandless, who turned his back on civilisation and paid a heavy price, invaded him, shaped him and, according to director Sean Penn, changed him from boy to man. Although you won't get him to say it... "Am I tooting my own horn? Am I saying I'm a man? I don't know, I'll leave that up to everybody else."

Reclining deep in his lounge like the guy in that old TV ad who gets a wind-rush from his new sound system, Hirsch is both intense and laid-back, pale-skinned, compact (he's 5ft 7in), someone who flips on a dime between mature musings and boyish frivolity. His idol Penn may have set Hirsch on the trail to adulthood, but strong hints of the boy still reverberate: eyebrow-lifting reactions, giddy delight at his own jokes and just the occasional flash of petulance. It's an appealing contrast – the edgy adolescence that fed his roles in *Alpha Dog* and *Lords Of Dogtown* evolving into the adult devotion on display in Penn's paean to one American college boy's quest for enlightenment.

Ironically, Emile Hirsch was waiting for enlightenment himself – or, at least, fretting where his next job was coming from – when he picked up the phone one day and a voice said, "Hey, it's Sean Penn!" When Hirsch realised it wasn't one of his mates crank-calling him, he was "dumbfounded". Like most young actors, he'd always looked up to Penn as "one of the greats... When I first got into acting in high school, it was Marlon Brando, Sean Penn, Daniel Day-Lewis and Robert De Niro. Those are the guys, you know, in terms of role models for young male actors – he was one of those guys for me."

Hirsch's mind was further blown when Penn invited him to hang out: sharing meals with Penn's family, going out drinking with Penn's pals (Alejandro González Iñárritu, Bono, Terrence Howard). At first, the *Mystic River* star wouldn't tell Hirsch what he had in mind, vaguely referring to "some projects I have". When he finally told Hirsch it was his film adaptation of *Into The Wild*, Jon Krakauer's bestseller about a freshly graduated college kid who rejects conventional society for a hand-to-mouth existence, the actor read the book and "flipped out – in the craziest sense of the >>



Young pretender: Hirsch as a skating prodigy in *Lords Of Dogtown* and as a drug dealer in *Alpha Dog* (below).



word – I just flipped. It’s this amazing human story of wanderlust and struggling against nature and man’s own heart that I really loved. I’m fascinated by stories of courage; I’m really curious about mountain climbers and skydivers and things I’m not! And I was struck by this guy’s courage.”

THE CHOSEN ONE

Penn, who’d admired Hirsch’s performance in *Lords Of Dogtown* as skating prodigy Jay Adams, was cautious for good reason: he’d spent 10 years wooing the McCandless family for the rights – and, frankly, he wasn’t all that impressed by what Young Hollywood had to offer. “This may just be the embittered older generation looking back at the young pricks,” Penn tells *Total Film*, “but generally I thought there was a shared weightlessness: some clever, some sexy, some charismatic but nobody that moved me. I wanted to photograph somebody while he was on the cusp of boy to man, and most of all I wanted somebody whose weight was their heart – all of those things came together in Emile.”

Hirsch plunged into a rigorous routine that required both emotional and physical discipline, poring over McCandless’ journals and favourite books – *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, *Call Of The Wild* by Jack London – to absorb his anti-materialist attitude; running 30 miles a week to build up endurance; dieting rigorously; and hiking and kayaking in preparation for the film’s eight-month odyssey of riding treacherous rapids, scaling steep slopes and floating naked down ice-cold rivers. It was hard but Hirsch knew Penn wouldn’t tolerate prima-donna behaviour.

“Emile the boy wasn’t allowed on set, you know, it was really time to ‘man up’ as they say,” he smiles. “And then we went from manning up to *really* manning up to where most of the men on set were like, ‘I’m a man and I wouldn’t do that!’ So we were like *he-manning up!* We went from boy to becoming a man and then man to becoming a he-man!” Hirsch is in hysterics now. “That’s funny...

but, yes, Sean was extremely hard on me in some circumstances. But I am so happy that he was.”

Was it ever difficult taking instruction from someone you’ve put on a pedestal your whole life? “No, it makes it better,” he shrugs. “You don’t question him. You trust him, you believe in him, you will do anything for him...”

And he did: nearly getting hypothermia during his nude river float; listening as Penn forbade the crew from helping him climb back up a hill after plunging over its brow into waist-deep snow; and riding the Colorado River rapids for three takes before spectacularly wiping out on the fourth. “I ate it really hard. I sucked in a lot of water. I’m sitting there all sopping wet on the boat and I go, ‘I’m done.’ And Sean, who’s the one who helped me out of the water, looks at me and he goes, [*Hirsch narrows his eyes*] ‘Hmmm...’ Eric the DP’s going, ‘No! One more shot, one more shot!’ and Sean looks at me and goes, ‘No... he’s done.’”

WANDERING FREE

A bright, privileged kid with a cosy life mapped out for him by his warring parents, Christopher McCandless donated his \$24,000 post-grad college fund to Oxfam and set out alone in 1990, adopting the pseudonym Alexander Supertramp and taking the barest necessities on a two-year odyssey through North America. Eventually, he ended up in Alaska, where a string of setbacks led him to the brink of the abyss. The uplifting genius of Penn’s film is that you can either identify with McCandless as an inspirational, anti-consumerist hero or an idealistic but naïve idiot. And that’s largely down to Hirsch, who, with guileless charm and robust intelligence, does an excellent job conveying both sides of McCandless and his giddy delight at living a life without boundaries.

Hirsch’s own background is emblematic suburban USA, although “more of a lower-class upbringing than Chris”, first in LA’s sprawling suburbs, then from six to 10 in



Growing up: (clockwise from left) with Elisha Cuthbert in *The Girl Next Door*; shooting *Into The Wild*; in indie flick *The Mudje Boy*.





Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he “got a taste of nature at a very young age: wandering the forests and the hills of Santa Fe, picking berries on the slopes and big thunderstorms just cracking down on me and my cousin Johnny.” At 10, the Hirsch clan trekked back to LA, where Emile became a self-confessed “skate-rat” and followed that well-trod Los Angeleno path into casting directors’ suites and telly bit-parts.

He made his movie debut in 2002’s *The Dangerous Lives Of Altar Boys*, playing a rebellious Catholic schoolboy, and spent a few years ducking and diving through US indies like *The Mudge Boy* and *Imaginary Heroes* before making a brief detour into teen-com fodder with *The Girl Next Door*. It was his two most recent roles, however – as Jay in *Lords Of Dogtown* and as Johnny Truelove, a malicious teen drug dealer based on the real-

You think I look like a cartoon?’ But I think they definitely thought it. With the right hair, the right shirt, I look downright anime...”

Declaring that one of his chief reasons for wanting to do *Speed Racer* was because it was Kurt Cobain’s favourite cartoon (“He used to slap stickers of [pet chimp] Chim-Chim on his electric guitars”), Hirsch brands the character “a very earnest, very serious young man. Just very [grits his teeth], ‘I’m gonna do the right thing!’ He’s battling the evil corporate empire. It’s like this very anti-corporate thing that, for a family film, I thought was pretty strange... you know, Wachowskian-ly subversive. I was like, ‘Cool!’ They put all this subtle stuff in there. Wait ‘til you see it...”

He’s reluctant to speculate what *Speed Racer* might do for his career and you can feel that Hirsch is anxious about leaving the carefree exuberance of youth behind and becoming a

‘Hirsch conveys the giddy delight of living a life without boundaries’

life Jesse James Hollywood, in *Alpha Dog* – that had Hollywood suits sitting bolt upright.

Following *Into The Wild*, Hirsch’s A-list status will be cemented next May with the release of the Wachowski Brothers’ first post-*Matrix* writing-directing collaboration, *Speed Racer*, based on the campy ’60s anime series. Going straight from his great-outdoors exploits on *Wild* to months of claustrophobic greenscreen work on a Berlin soundstage (which accounts for his pasty complexion) was, says Hirsch, “an intense experience”.

Ask him about driving Speed’s Mach 5 roadster and he laughs sardonically. “It didn’t exist! It was a sophisticated cockpit on this big rig and they threw it around 360 degrees... Gave me whiplash.” Did the Wachowskis tell Emile they cast him because they thought he resembled “demon on wheels” Speed? “No! They didn’t say that to me ‘cos I would have been like [sulky pout], ‘What do you mean?

“responsible” star. After wrapping up *Wild* press duties, he plans to just chill out in Venice Beach, where he lives, hiking in the canyons, skateboarding down the promenade, hitting the town with buddies like Ben Foster, who he met on *Alpha Dog* (“We’re nemeses in the movie but he’s my best friend that I walked away with”), and waiting to see what comes next. But like his on-screen alter ego, Hirsch has already embarked on an incredible journey. And he knows it.

“To have all of this happen?” he enthuses. “I was just happy that Sean Penn called me! And then to get to hang out with him and then make the movie? I feel like the luckiest guy in the history of the world.”

Into The Wild opens on 9 November and is reviewed on page 58. Speed Racer opens in May 2008 and will be reviewed in a future issue of Total Film.

THE NEED FOR SPEED

Total Film hangs out at Speed’s pad...



Now, when the Wachowski Brothers invite you over to Berlin to have a poke around Emile Hirsch’s *Speed Racer* pad, you don’t say no – even if you think you’re in for an afternoon of

gawking at nothing but greenscreens.

And so it was that *Total Film* toddled off to Germany and winded up trawling round not an empty soundstage but an actual house, built from the ground up with a staggering attention to detail lavished on everything, right down to the kitsch quality of the plates. That every single object relates to cars in some way makes for a surreal tour, with the skewering towards a ’50s vibe adding an extra twist.

“It’s kinda mid-century, but it’s not strictly mid-century,” explains visual effects guru John Gaeta as he takes *Total Film* by the hand. Figuratively, of course. “We’ve taken bits from earlier on, it’s a bit futuristic... but yeah, it definitely lends itself to that 1950s sensibility.” He grins. “The whole idea is that in this world, with the Racer family, cars and environments are all integrated together. It’s all about the cars.”

He’s not kidding. From the petrol-tinted paintings on the walls, to the racing trophies filling every shelf, the pad is a gear-head’s oil-dream. And it’s not just for show; this stuff actually works.

Gaeta steps into the kitchen, a satisfied smirk on his face. “This is where Susan Sarandon will use the oven to make the pancakes and the cookies!” he beams. Er, OK. Can we see the garage now please?

And, sure enough, the Racer’s family garage (the “conversation pit,” as Gaeta puts it) is an impressive space, filled with real-world tools. A flight of steel stairs lead to an office-cum-design space. It’s here that John Goodman will no doubt be getting his flashes of inspiration, charging out from behind his desk and sliding down the steel banisters (don’t worry, they look sturdy) to realise his dreams.

It’s a stunning set, but one thing’s for sure: this is not the cartoon that a generation of kids grew up with. Gaeta admits to there being differences, but doesn’t think die-hard Racer fans will be short-changed. “The cartoon was very much where we wanted to go,” he purrs soothingly. “The house doesn’t necessarily look like the one in the cartoon, sure. But the cars? Certainly.”

