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2>'chalk' Far From Old School

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By ROB THOMAS The Capital Times

It's late August, when back-to-school sales are everywhere and teachers are gearing up for the fall semester. Is Chris Mass, a former high school geography teacher turned actor and screenwriter, feeling the tug back to the classroom?

"I got to be honest, I'm not," Mass says in a phone interview. "There's things I miss. It's very structured, which I don't have as much of now. Most of it I don't really miss. The in-service days are what you usually start out with, and those are just brutal."

Mass seems to be having far more fun pitching and writing new projects in Hollywood, and enjoying the fruits of his first film, the comedy "Chalk." Shot in the fake-documentary style of "The Office" and "Best in Show," the film supposedly takes audiences into the faculty lounge at an average American high school, following everyone from the overworked assistant principal to the terrified new teacher. Mass plays Mr. Stroope, the self-described "cool teacher" who is openly gunning for the "Teacher of the Year" award.

In the course of playing festivals and later a theatrical run in more than 40 cities, "Chalk" never played to a larger audience than it did at the Wisconsin Film Festival in Madison in early April, when some 1,100 people sold out the opening-night screening. Mass and his filmmaking partner, "Chalk" writer-director Mike Akel, actually needed a little coaxing to bring "Chalk" to Madison, and were glad they did.

"That was an amazing screening," Mass says. "That was a lot of fun. Meg (film festival director Hamel) just charmed us. We were kind of done with the festival thing, but she was like, 'Come on guys, we really love the film.' She just kind of filled us in on what Madison was, and she didn't lie."

"Chalk" returns to Madison starting today for a weeklong run at the Sundance Cinemas as part of the theater's Screening Room series. The DVD of the film will be released at the end of September, and Mass and Akel are already busy on other projects. They're writing a screenplay for Universal Pictures on Little League baseball and in the next couple of weeks will begin pitching the idea of a "Chalk" television show to networks.

FACT-BASED FICTION

The offices of network executives are a long way from the Austin, Texas, coffee shops where Mass and Akel would meet before the opening bell to work on "Chalk." In addition to both being teachers, the duo had a background in improv comedy and had worked on film projects before.

They thought they had never seen the real teaching experience on film, particularly what brand-new teachers have to go through, and thought that would make a good idea for a film. Mass said he has worked with kids for much of his life, so he had a much easier time starting in the classroom than the fictional Mr. Lowrey.

"You've just got to know how kids work," he says. "You know that you have to have boundaries, and you have to lay down the law, and you have to follow through because that's how they know that you really care about them. And then you still have problems. But it went a lot better than Lowrey."

Mass says above all he and Akel wanted to honor teachers with their film, and he grew concerned that his own character, who at one point dresses down a smart pupil for using too many big words, was coming off as too much of a buffoon.

"We wanted to kind of laugh at teachers but not ridicule or belittle them," he says. "It's a fine line there, and it was really tough. I remember fighting Mike on some of the Stroope stuff. And 98 percent of the time, teachers who come up to us afterward are like, 'We have a guy just like that at our school.' Teaching is just one of those worlds that seems to have characters that stand out."

Although it's riotously funny, the film takes pains to show how difficult teaching can be, and why half of all new teachers quit within three years. "Chalk" follows Lowrey's first year in the classroom, and at the end doesn't reveal whether he returns for a second year. Mass says audience reaction usually runs about 60-40 in favor of him not returning.

"Some people hated that we left it open, but we couldn't just put a big bow on the end," he says. "And we didn't want to be depressing."

The film was shot in a loose style that encouraged improvisation, with the filmmakers sometimes secretly feeding one actor a situation or line and then surprising the other actors with it in the middle of filming to see the reaction. One of the funniest lines of the film comes during a yoga class when Mass coaches one of the students, unbeknownst to the rest of the cast, to blurt out the line "I'm feeling hot and vulnerable right now."

"We just created these rules where no matter what happens, until you hear 'Cut!' go with it," Mass says. "What's so funny (in that scene) is that you have the students bust out laughing, which is what they would do. And then the teacher, she's trying to regain control, which is what you do. And she stands up and says, 'You know, I'm glad he said that.' As a teacher, that's what you do. You improvise."

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