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Emile Hirsch: emboldened by Brando and fostered by Foster, this young actor is a heavyweight in the making - Interview

[Interview](#), [April, 2004](#) by [Vincent D'Onofrio](#)

With his stirring movie debut in *The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys* (2002) opposite Jodie Foster, Kieran Culkin, and Vincent D'Onofrio (his interviewer here), Emile Hirsch, with his soft eyes and hard-to-forget talent, established himself in indie-filmmaking circles as the teenage drama king. (Fans of TV's *Project Greenlight* will recall that he was the kid everyone wanted to cast as the lead in *The Battle of Shaker Heights*, but just couldn't reel in.) Now 19, Hirsch is broadening his body of work and his audience with his first studio comedy, *The Girl Next Door*. And later this month, Hirsch will be back in the art house with *The Mudge Boy*, a drama that, D'Onofrio discovers, left quite an impression on the young actor.

VINCENT D'ONOFRIO: Hey, bud. How are you?

EMILE HIRSCH: Good, good.

VD: You've been busy, huh?

EH: I've been working a lot, but there's so much time when I'm doing nothing.

VD: Of course. That's what it's like making movies. There's a lot of downtime. Now, I know you sent me a video of *The Mudge Boy* yesterday, but I haven't seen it yet. Tell me: What's it about?

EH: It's about the Mudge boy--that's my character's last name. He's an alienated kid who lives in small-town America. His mother just passed away, and he and his father have never really communicated before, so it's kind of the beginning of their relationship together. And it's also the first time he has really had a chance to make some friends.

VD: It sounds pretty heavy.

EH: Yeah, it is. But we had some fun times. My character is about 15, and there's a scene where I don't have my shirt on. Now, I have a really hairy chest--I've got to brag for a second [laughs]--so I was going to shave it, but everyone was like, "No, use Nair." I put it on my whole body. The label said don't put it on your nipples, and apparently there's a reason why.

VD: Oh, no! It burned you?

EH: Yeah. My nipples scabbed. It was horrible.

VD: [laughs] How is *The Girl Next Door*?

EH: I haven't seen it yet, but the script was really funny. And it gave me an opportunity to do some comedy.

VD: What's your character like?

EH: He's a really ambitious high school senior, but he hasn't lived--not in the wild and crazy sense. He feels like he's missed out on things. One day he meets the girl of his dreams next door, but all is not what it seems to be.

VD: Don't give it away! You've got to leave the people hungry for something. You know, when we worked together on *The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys*, one of the things I respected most about you was that even at the age you were back then--how old were you?

EH: About 15.

VD: Wow. I'd never met somebody your age who was so committed to acting.

EH: Thank you. I started acting when I was 10, but I never had a total fascination with it. It was just kind of a fun thing I did. Then I saw *A Streetcar Named Desire* [1951] with Marion Brando and Vivien Leigh when I was 14, and it was like a slap in the face. It was a wake-up call.

YD: Let me ask you, When you're going to do a project and you're thinking about the character, are you confident in your process?

EH: No. Well, it depends. Sometimes I'm totally sure of myself, and other times I think I don't know anything. Confidence is very elusive.

VD: It's a constant struggle to achieve 100-percent confidence. That struggle is where our performance lies. It is our performance. So, working on all the films you've done recently, you're starting to learn how different directors can be, huh?

EH: Yeah. I just finished shooting *Imaginary Heroes*, which was written and directed by Dan Harris. We'd improvise and do things in the moment, which was a lot of fun. Dan lets you find out for yourself what the character's doing, and he really wants you to bring something to the table.

VD: I think that the best directors--the best ones I've worked with--do half their job in casting. You're there because they're clever enough to have you there, and they expect you to come up with the goods, you know? Now, when you're on a set, are you able to deal with the people around you, the politics, and everything?

EH: I think a lot of actors feel like they have to make everyone happy. I feel like that too in a way, but I also know I'm there to play a role. I don't look at it like it's a getting-to-know-you experience. What's important to me is the performance. But, when we're not shooting, it's completely different. [both laugh]

VD: Yeah, we had a blast together. Okay, my brother. Hopefully soon we can do what we've talked about and play father and son.

EH: Yeah, we will. Definitely.

Vincent D'Onofrio stars on *Law & Order: CI*.

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