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Coverage from the Toronto International Film Festival

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Penn butts out at TIFF

John Powell - Cineplex Entertainment

There was no smoke and no fire today at the Toronto International Film Festival.

With a police officer standing on guard just outside the room, the Sutton Place Hotel hosted a press conference for Sean Penn's latest film, 'Into the Wild'.

Unlike last year when the hotel was fined because Penn defied the city's anti-smoking laws by lighting up at the 'All the King's Men' presser, Penn was on his best behaviour this time around. Sipping from a tasty beverage and sometimes chewing on the ice, Penn refrained from taking any rebellious smoke breaks.

Emile Hirsch in 'Into the Wild'.

Based on the reverence Penn has for the source material for 'Into the Wild', it is no wonder that he refrained from causing an uproar or distraction. Ever since finding Jon Krakauer's heart-breaking book detailing the true story of wanderer Christopher McCandless in a book store ten

years ago, Penn wanted to tell the tale.

"This movie is exactly the book that I read," said Penn who wrote and directed the picture.

When asked about George Clooney's comment the day before at the Festival about there not being enough good scripts in Hollywood these days, Penn dismissed the idea based on his good fortune in working with so many talented writers and directors.

"I am not going to complain about the lack of good stories," a satisfied Penn told Cineplex Entertainment.

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where it would eventually end in tragedy.

"It was like the memory was unearthed," said Hirsch about being approached for the role years after seeing the story when he was just a child on the ABC new program '20/20'.

Hirsch hitches a ride in 'Into the Wild'. At Penn's insistence, Hirsch read the book and prepared for the role by running and hiking. Hirsch also deliberately spent time by himself.

"I spent a lot of time alone to 'record' myself when I was lonely," said Hirsch. "I noticed that a lot of the negatives passed down from society went away. I found a moral core that had all of the dirt wiped off."

Many of the actors who would star as Christopher's family accepted invitations to meet the real members of the McCandless clan.

Marcia Gay Harden, who plays Christopher's mother, spent time with her at the family home and was moved by the visit.

"I called up Sean and told him that I needed to defend her. She was right," said Harden.

William Hurt admits that he "chickened out" of his meeting though.

"I remained an actor playing a role with people I admire." he said.

For Jena Malone, who narrates the film as Christopher's sister Carine, meeting a living person whom she would be portraying was a unique experience.

"I found her to be real open and sharing," said Malone of spending time and getting to know the real Carine.

For his part, Penn refused to take any direct credit for shaping any of the performances in the film.

"I really f-----g resent it when people say a director brings a performance out of an actor," he said. "Actors gives the performances to the director. I am just the organizer of a family."

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