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CHRIS WEITZ

From the helm of *American Pie*,
About a Boy, and *Twilight*:
New Moon, the filmmaker
turns to the story of a
father, son, and LA's
undocumented
society

BY **ANDREW FISH**
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Few top-shelf directors have a resume as eclectic as that of Chris Weitz. He and his older brother, Paul, wrote the screenplay to the 1998 feature, *Antz*, starring the voice of Woody Allen, at the dawn of computer-animated films. The project's success led to their helming of *American Pie*, the 1999 teen sex comedy that became a cultural touchstone. This led to their work on the Chris Rock-starring *Down to Earth* in 2001, and then to writing and directing *About a Boy*, featuring Hugh Grant and Rachel Weisz, the following year, which earned the brothers an Oscar nomination for best adapted screenplay. Amid their directing and producing, Weitz co-starred in *Chuck and Buck* (2000), a

bizarrely honest portrayal of sexuality and arrested development, which became a cult classic. Stepping away from his sibling, Chris then wrote and directed *The Golden Compass*, the 2007 mega-budget adaptation of the first book in the controversial fantasy-novel trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, by Philip Pullman. "It's not fun to be edited sometimes," Weitz recalls of his disappointment with the film's final cut. Turning it all around, the versatile filmmaker then took on *Twilight: New Moon*, the 2009 box-office record-breaking second installment of the love-struck vampire juggernaut.

Weitz has moved into new territory with his latest release, *A Better Life*. Set in Los Angeles, the film is an intimate portrait of an illegal Mexican immigrant and his teenaged son whose disconnected worlds come together when they set off to track down the father's stolen gardening truck. Depicting their world of laying low and keeping quiet, gangs and the lure of crime, and the ever-present threat of deportation, *A Better Life* also serves as a social and political document. "In terms of its implications," says Weitz, "it's the biggest film that I've made." The London-educated talent, whose grandmother is Mexican actress, Lupita Tovar, forged a new connection with this part of his heritage and learned Spanish for the project. With a desire to aim a lens at an integral part of L.A. society that most of us know little about, Weitz cast Demián Bichir, one of Mexico's monumental stars — best known in the US as criminal politician Esteban Reyes, on Showtime's "Weeds" — and newcomer José Julián.

"He took three buses and it took three hours for him to get to our casting office," Weitz remarks of Julián. "He grew up in East L.A., his mom moved them to the Valley to be safer, and he really knows what he's playing. He's one of these rare people who can be natural in front of the camera." Providing critical financing, actress Jami Gertz came aboard as producer with her Lime Orchard Productions. "She was an actor since being a teen," Weitz relates, "so it was good for her to be able to mentor José as well." Grateful for her help, he continues, "It's a risk for them. Any time you can make a movie without having to have anything explode, you feel like you're getting away with murder." Venice met up with Weitz at his seaside home in Malibu, where he lives with his wife and child.

Venice: *A Better Life* offers a view of L.A. that many of us never see. You can live here and not know anything about the lives of undocumented workers.

Chris Weitz: Inasmuch as this movie is about Los Angeles, it's about these parallel universes which coexist with one another but never really cross until they have to. There's the world of the undocumented immigrant

who has to keep his head down and stay invisible; that's an invisible world. There's the world of Central American flop-houses, there's the world of the men on the corner who are waiting to get picked up to go to work, there's the world of gangs. Also, it's the worlds of parents and children, in a more universal sense. The father is working so hard that he doesn't get enough time to spend with his son. His son is living in a world that is circumscribed by the safe zone of his neighborhood, outside of which he's actually in danger. A school where they don't care about him, and the world of the television which tells him that his father is worthless and that he is going to be worthless unless he makes a lot of money. So he feels, in his own way, just as disenfranchised as his father.

How did you go about delving into this project?

I knew that I was going to need the right kind of education to enter into these worlds, so I went to Father Gregory Boyle at Homeboy Industries, which is an amazing gang intervention program. They give jobs to gang members who want to come in from the cold, basically. Through Father Boyle and through Hector Verdugo, who runs Homeboys with him, I learned more about the social nexus that surrounds gang life. When you see gang characters in the movie, these are guys who come from Homeboys. They're ex-gang members. People fall into gangs because it's a last resort, but they still have family members, they still have nieces and nephews and brothers and cousins and friends. The way to get into all of these different worlds and to learn about them was to actually stop for a second, think about it, and ask questions. There are worlds which you had thought of in your mind as being dismal, like a place like Ramona Gardens, which is a housing complex — but if you go there on an average afternoon or evening, there's a bunch of kids playing outside, and families. There's this cool van that comes by that's kind of the equivalent of a green grocer and there's a great taco stand that sets up by the market. The kids in the neighborhood would come and watch on the monitor behind us and check out what we were doing, and ask if it was going to be on TV and stuff like that. Then there was this kid who said, "I want to show you my fish." It was in between shots and he took me by the hand, into his house, past his parents who were watching the Lakers game on TV. He took me into his bedroom and he showed me this little Siamese fighting fish. I always think that he was basically saying, "Okay, you might have this big movie and that's great. Good for you. But I've got this fish and he's awesome." [laughs] So it was learning to appreciate that people don't see their own lives as filled with struggle and strife. They don't see their lives as a movie

of the week. They're living their own lives and they're probably just as unaware of us as we are of them.

There doesn't seem to be a judgment made about undocumented workers in this film.

Not really, but the moment you point a camera on a situation that's politicized, you are, in a sense, making a political film, but we haven't set out to make any kind of political statement. It's just that people are bound to view it differently once they see an immigrant in the lens, and cameras haven't been pointed at this kind of story. There are a lot of people like Demián's character in this country. There are criminals, there are regular people, there are very good, honest decent people, and for the most part I think that the immigrants here form that latter category of church-going, respectable, hard-working people. But we also take pains to show that the cops, the people at ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement], they're not mustache-twirlers. They're just guys who are doing their jobs and we can be sympathetic towards them as well. It's a tough situation for everybody.

Tell us about working with Demián Bichir.

He's a monster. In Mexico, he's one of the biggest movie stars that there is. In America, he's on "Weeds" and he played Fidel [Castro] in *Che* [2008], but his face is relatively unknown. I think that's going to change, so I think we've gotten him in what was, for me, just the perfect point. We get to bring to bear his tremendous technical excellence and we get this amazing performance out of somebody who is not recognizable to most of the people who are going to see the movie. With Demián, the audience gets to discover him as time goes along.

What about your beginnings? How did you and Paul get that initial *Antz* meeting with Jeffrey Katzenberg?

It was totally random. I was having brunch with my brother at Hugo's in West Hollywood, and an old school friend, literally from grade school, was there at another table. He's like, "I've had this idea for this animated movie about ants and Woody Allen is supposed to be in it, but we can't find the right writer to get it to the stage where Woody Allen's going to agree to do it." And as it happened, I am a huge fan of social insects; I'm really interested in ants and in bees. And I was able to say with the conviction that only comes with actually telling the truth, "I love ants. I know everything about ants and I also love Woody Allen. We're your guys. You've gotta take us in and let us do our thing." So that's how it happened. I like to think that I work really hard; I like to think that I'm pretty good at what I do; but luck played a huge part in it. Which is why whenever people who

want to be actors or screenwriters will ask, "How do I get into this?" I can only say, "You've got to be really, really lucky." I advise against it because of the tremendous luck factor involved. For me, I've got to constantly remind myself to work hard because of the factor of luck. All I can control is the quality of my output and I have to be grateful to the stars, basically.

American Pie reignited the racy teen sex comedy.

For which everyone's eternally grateful. [laughs] One thing I'll say about it is it's humane. First of all, we wanted to make space for the girls. They actually talk about sex, they think about it, they freak out about it just as much as boys — and also the key factor was that it was the girls who are really in control of the tap, the faucet of sex. [laughs] So it's the boys who are really getting humiliated, and that kind of inverts the paradigm, I think, of movies like *Porky's*

What was it like when you started *Twilight: New Moon*, which was such a highly visible project?

For me, it was tremendously refreshing because I knew that people were going to go see it. So there's no pressure on me, as far as I'm concerned. Instead of treating it in any way like a popcorn movie, I just decided to treat it like a big, widescreen romance. That conditioned getting Alexandre Desplat to write the score and getting Javier Aguirresarobe, who's one of the great DPs in the world, to shoot it. I knew that if I was true to the spirit of the book, there were all kinds of things I could get away with in terms of what we were doing with the camera and the lushness of the colors and the design. It was a complete delight. Kristen Stewart is an amazing actress. Really, she's an independent film actress of the highest caliber. So she will bring to what's essentially a melodrama these very harsh emotions. Coming out the other end of it when we

You and your brother have also acted together. How did you guys get involved with *Chuck and Buck*?

My brother was friends with [director] Miguel Arteta, Miguel was friends with [screenwriter] Mike White, and Mike White wrote this mad script that Miguel wanted to do. I have to say about *Chuck and Buck* that it was a film made with no compromise whatsoever, and no regard for whether an audience was going to accept it or not. But a lot of people did because it is precisely what it is. It was really Miguel and Mike; we were just along for the ride. I was like, "Let's make this kind of crazy movie for nothing. Let's do it."

Do you and Paul have plans to work with each other again as directors?

Yes, we talk about it a lot now. We're just trying to figure out what it would be that we would do next. But we've spent enough time working apart, I think.

Doing something precisely the way you think it ought to be done, even if it's sort of weird or you don't think that audiences are immediately going to cotton to it, is actually the best thing to do.

where's it's usually that the guys are getting away with murder. Also, casting Eugene Levy was a tremendous coup for the film because he brought this humanity to the part of the father figure. He was perfect for it. He brought so much to it, and he was doomed to do several more of them. [laughs]

And you brought the word "MILF" into our lexicon.

It'll be on my tombstone.

Was it surprising to you the amount of success the film achieved and how it ingrained itself into our culture?

It was a shock that it did as well as it did, because we didn't have big stars in it and it was all word of mouth. It was extraordinary.

Then you moved on to *About a Boy*.

Which in itself was a strange change of pace because it was essentially a foreign film. When we had a test screening in London, there was this one comment that really leapt out at me, which was that someone said, "This is really just a good British film." Although it wasn't our biggest box-office success domestically, in its after-life that DVD and cable gives you, people are more fond of that movie than anything I've ever worked on. It's a really good example of how doing something precisely the way you think it ought to be done, even if it's sort of weird or you don't think that audiences are immediately going to cotton to it, is actually the best thing to do.

were marketing the film, that was madness — in a very enjoyable way for me because I kind of got to be the Ringo Starr of the group. We traveled around Europe, the big three and me, and the biggest it got was Munich's Olympic Stadium with 23,000 screaming fans who were there just to see us say hello and answer a few softball questions. There were moments where you felt that this could get dangerous or this could get really weird, really fast. It was rather extraordinary.

Having worked on these effects-heavy films, do you find it challenging to oversee both the big action scenes as well as the relationships between the characters?

Yes, it's enough to drive you slightly batty. With *Golden Compass*, that was as big a movie as New Line had ever made. It's certainly the biggest movie I've ever made. It cost a tremendous amount of money and we had all kinds of resources at our disposal. And at the same time it had to be an intimate story about the coming of age of a little girl, but it's also about parallel universes and it was also about original sin and all kinds of stuff. And eventually, it became too much for the studio to want to deal with on straightforward terms. They realized that they had gotten into a story that was far more controversial than they had ever thought. They wanted *Harry Potter* and this story was inherently not. So to be honest, doing *New Moon* — even though it's a very big movie and we had a big budget and a lot of special effects — this was, for me, technically easy.

There's been talk of you guys adapting Michael Moorcock's *Elric* saga.

I would love to. Look, it would be a big movie and it's hard to get the money together to make these films. I want to keep trying because I think that the script for it is great, but it would take some balls from somebody.

Is it important to you to take on projects that are very different from each other?

Yes, that's really purposeful. I get bored kind of easily and I don't like being pigeonholed. I just always want to be doing something different from the last time.

What do you love about what you do?

The cast and crew is what I love. It's working with people and having a good time doing that, and the people whom one gets to meet along the way. Like I got to meet Ozomatli as part of this process. That was amazing because I love them as a band, and suddenly they're making a song for our movie! How great is that? I get to meet extraordinary people, and extraordinary "ordinary" people in the course of doing this. People like Hector Verdugo at Homeboys or Father Boyle. That's so brilliant to get to know people through the medium of making movies. There are quicker ways to tell stories, but the people, eventually, are what matters. ▼

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