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'Holes' collaboration left no one feeling empty

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DENVER - Stanley Yelnats is a good kid with terrible luck and a family curse to boot. So when this oddly named, unlikely hero of Louis Sachar's award-winning children's book "Holes" is found guilty of a crime he didn't commit and sent to a juvie prison where boys dig holes all day "to build character," he's not sure which to blame. All he knows is that he always seems to be "in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Director Andy Davis must be the anti-Stanley. He has a knack for being at the right place at the right time with just the right script.

"It's sort of a dream come true to work with a piece of material this wonderful," Davis says during a recent publicity tour in Denver.

"But I also think the relationship with Louis and I and my team ... is what you really hope would happen: you like each other, you're doing good work together, and it turns out to be something you're proud of."

Flattered by the interest in his story, Sachar initially hesitated to write the screenplay himself, something he had never done before and frankly found a bit daunting.

"I was very worried about the whole giantness of Hollywood," he recalls. "I was very much surprised when I got there just how respectful and warm and nice everyone was. And the level of the talent ..."

The star power is potent, indeed. As Davis tells it, Sigourney Weaver's daughter read the book and said, "Mom, you should be the Warden."

And so she is, with Jon Voight and Tim Blake Nelson as her right-hand men.

Patricia Arquette is an Old West school teacher turned outlaw and Dul Hill (Charlie on "The West Wing") is her love interest. Eartha Kitt plays a Latvian voodoo woman who curses Stanley's great-great-grandfather and all his future family, and full-time Laker, part-time actor Rick Fox weighs in as Clyde "Sweet Feet" Livingston, the athlete whose stolen shoes land first on Stanley's head, then land him in jail.

Still, it's the younger actors who carry the movie.

"These are wonderful funny, funny, goofy crazy kids, ya know, and very talented," Davis says. "Sometimes when they were all together, the seven of them, they would drive me crazy. We'd be trying to talk to the crew and the technicians about how we were going to deal with the cameras or the props and they'd be screwing around. I'd have to scream at them, 'Hey, you yokels, you're getting paid for this. Be quiet!' Or 'I'm gonna cut you out of the movie.' But it was all in good fun."

He has nothing but praise for his cast, particularly Voight, who quickly became a mentor to the youngsters, and teenage TV actor Shia LaBeouf ("Even Stevens") in the lead role.

"We had a larger Stanley in mind," Davis says, explaining the discrepancy between the character as Sachar wrote it and the one in the film.

"We had five or six kids and we decided to go with Shia because we had this great actor. He had a vulnerability. We talked about (Tom) Hanks. We talked about Dustin Hoffman. We talked about Gene Wilder. That's what I sort of had in my brain."

LaBeouf stocked up on junk food to try to put the weight on, but Sachar stopped him.

"I didn't go into this with the idea of protecting the book, making sure it follows the story every step of the way," he says. "I was more interested in ... doing my part to make it a great movie."

Detail was not a casualty, however, when it came to recreating locations, even though they don't really exist.

In print, Sachar describes a series of rich, realistic landscapes, jumping from Latvia more than a century ago to late 1800s and modern-day Texas. They're settings that, like all good imaginary realms, are easy to picture. But when it comes to bringing them to life on the big screen ...

"I had no idea," admits Davis. He points casually at Sachar and laughs. "I mean, this guy creates these farkuckt (fouled-up) scenes."

A desert with thousands of holes. A mountain shaped like a thumb. Water flowing upstream. Poisonous spotted lizards.

Not quite what Davis, whose credits include "The Fugitive" and "Collateral Damage," was used to, but he made it happen for this, his first book-adaptation project.

"He didn't give it second-class status because it's a children's book," Sachar acknowledges, but the book naturally lent itself to that approach.

Subtlety - having a moral without beating you over the head with it - allows "Holes" to be a kids movie that adults can enjoy without resorting to Disney's common solution of telling the story on two levels.

Even within the boundaries of clean humor and mild adventure, Sachar assumes a certain level of maturity in his readers when he touches on such topics as interracial dating, immigration and homelessness.

"That's why the book's so beautiful," Davis says. "It doesn't run away from these realities."