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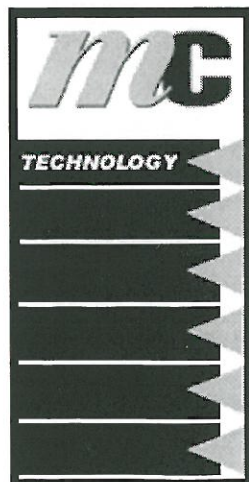
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ONLINE COLUMNS

CROSSOVER March 01, 2001

Hit the Highway

Director Michael Cuesta Takes A Look At Life Off The L.I.E.



By Elizabeth Michaelson

Michael Cuesta, who directs spots through the bicoastal A+R Group, has just completed his first feature. *L.I.E.* is the story of Howie [Paul Franklin Dano], a troubled boy dealing with his mother's death and his own adolescence in his Long Island home.

Like his main character, Cuesta grew up in Dix Hills, Long Island. The director, who studied graphic design and photography at the School of Visual Arts, New York, graduating in 1985, recalled starting "as a photographer, doing mostly advertising work," and then moving into commercials. He has been directing spots full-time for about eight years, and has been with the A+R Group during most of that period.

Cuesta and his brother Gerald, a copywriter at FCB, New York, came up with the idea for *L.I.E.* several years ago. Eventually they brought in Stephen M. Ryder to collaborate on the screenplay. The director explained, "At first it was a much darker, bleaker story, and the Big John character [played by British character actor Brian Cox] wasn't as fleshed out: He was this two-dimensional, menacing monster. I knew we were ready to make *L.I.E.* when his character arced a little bit more, and he became more human. [The development of] his character helped me find the ending to the movie."

The production took a while to get off the ground due to Cuesta's busy schedule. In fact, he said, "I did shelve the movie several times, because I thought, 'No one's ever going to want to make this film.'" But eventually he found financing, and the movie was shot in August 2000.

Cuesta found feature directing much different from spot helming, and he thinks that's a difference commercial directors should be aware of: "So many commercial directors bring their commercial sensibility right into the movie, and that's not where it belongs. Some commercial directors don't know how to build a movie slowly & *L.I.E.* is, I hope, subtle. You're not aware of the weight of the movie until the last shot. Some directors put so much attention into every :30 that you get bored. They turn emotions on a dime."

L.I.E. premiered at this year's Sundance Film Festival in January. "This is my first film, my first festival," Cuesta explained, "so I don't know what else to compare it to. Being there, I found it to be very much a market. People seemed to care the most about what distributors were at their screenings, and I felt that pressure, too. Which was a drag, because it was my first screening, and I was thinking, 'What did Sony Pictures think of the film?'" *L.I.E.* will be shown at the New Directors New Films series at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) and, said Cuesta, "I'm really looking forward to MOMA, because it's just going to be about the film, not wondering whether that guy stayed for the credits or not."

He continued, "I think film festivals exist in order to screen work; they're not about money or commerce. Sundance was great: They really treat you well. A lot of people help you, set you up with tickets, passes, parties. & It's the most coveted festival. For any filmmaker it's a great way to screen your movie, because you have the best shot at a distribution deal. I think if you don't get picked up there, it'll be tough to get picked up. That's where all the main distributors go."

L.I.E. was picked up by New York-based distributors Lot 47, and the film is tentatively slated for release this fall. "We're looking to open it in a couple of markets first: New York, L.A., Chicago. They may want to try to play a crossover

markets first: New York, L.A., Chicago. They may want to try to play a crossover audience, try to play it a little more commercial."

While Cuesta and his brother are working on another feature script, currently the director is preparing to helm spots: "Doing this film gave me a new respect for commercials," he observed. "The beauty of commercials is that you're able to get in and out quicker, and your results are more immediate. There's something very satisfying about that. With a movie, it's much more stressful, because you don't know if you have it until eight months later. The preproduction, shooting and postproduction are just endless. I found it really difficult."

In many films, Long Island and its residents are depicted as either unsophisticated middle-Americans or wealthy suburbanites, out of touch with the realities of everyday life. But in the past few years, directors like Hal Hartley and Ed Burns have turned their lenses to their native Long Island to give another view of the area. What is Cuesta's take? "It's one of the biggest suburbs in the world," he pointed out, "It is its own microcosm, really. My thing was not to make a statement about suburbia or Long Island-it was this kid's story; it could have taken place anywhere. Long Island is interesting because it's so mixed ethnically and economically. There are a lot of stories there."