

Meet Hollywood's Youngest Feature Screenwriter

People are always so shocked when they find out that I wrote a screenplay because I am so young. They always ask me, "Where did you come up with the idea for it?" and "What motivated you?" My answer isn't really that complex. I just wrote it. I think that everyone is passionate about something. When you enjoy something, you just do it without even thinking about it. My passion is writing.

When I started writing *Purgatory House*, I really didn't know what I was doing. I just wrote. I was going through a really difficult time in my life, and writing let out all of these bottled-up emotions and frustrations. I never thought my script would become much more than words scribbled in my notebook. The beginning came magically. I knew how I wanted the story to develop, so I just wrote down all of my thoughts. Since I never really imagined that it would be made into a movie, it was very easy to be blunt. I didn't censor anything—it was extremely raw material.

The storyline for *Purgatory House* revolves around a teenage girl named Silver who is unhappy with her life. She does all kinds of drugs and feels completely lost. Silver is a young junkie-in-the-making and a total outcast. She feels as if all of her friends have turned against her, and it's very hard to be accepted for who she is. She turns to drugs as a way to fit in but in doing so, ends up complicating her life even more. She gets so fed up with things that are just too crazy for a 14-year-old to deal with that ultimately she takes her life. She kills herself because she wants to be with God who she thinks will love her unconditionally and take her to live in the "Happy Place." Instead, she ends up in a place which is the complete opposite of what she was hoping for. God turns out to be a drag-queen game show host and has her play a game called "Who wants to go to Heaven." Her prize is an all expense paid trip to Purgatory House where she discovers that running away from her issues just makes them stay with her for eternity. How would

you like to spend eternity? Would you like to have the same outfit that you died in racked endlessly in your closet? Would you like to eat the same stupid oatmeal for breakfast every morning? How would you like to sit in a cold, lonely cell with a giant television set that plays only your old reality? Would you like to watch your friends and family mourn your death knowing that eventually they would get over the emptiness they feel in their lives now that you are gone? How would you like to watch them move on with their lives without you? As if that's not bad enough, then imagine yourself in the worst state you've ever been and imagine staying that way forever. This is Silver's reality. She is destined to do the same ridiculous things that she wished she could have changed when she was alive, but in *Purgatory House* she can't change ever again—because it's not allowed. (At least that's what she thinks.) Silver wanted the drugs and the insanity to end when she killed herself, but instead she got stuck with them forever.

Silver's character is a reflection of myself, although Silver does things I would never do. She is an intense, way more dangerous version of me. I thought that by creating this character, maybe I would never have to walk down the same path that she does. So far it's worked! Developing this character has affected everything in my life. When I wrote the screenplay, I was lost and rebellious. I felt so different from everybody else that I wanted to prove a point about what was happening to me and how it was affecting me. I felt like everyone around me glorified drugs, and they made it seem like doing drugs was the coolest thing to do. The way I look at it is, in high school you are either a "cool druggie" or a "snob," and I was neither. I didn't know where I fit in. The strangest part was that even though I didn't do drugs, the kids at my school all thought that I was a total drug addict because I was freaky and insane. I got attention and felt as if I was cool in a different way. I thought that if I conformed to one of their stereotypes, then I would be a weak



Screenwriter/Actor Celeste Davis and director Cindy Baer. Photo by: Lauren Virdone ©2001

person. I was trying so hard to rebel against everything and everyone. Now, looking back, I just laugh because I see that those things don't really matter to me anymore.

In *Purgatory House*, Silver's best friend is named Celeste. I gave her my name because she's my alter ego. I based her on a combination of my old best friend and myself. This character is not a nice girl. She'll be your best friend and act as if she loves and understands you, but she really just hates you. That is why she is so important. When you don't like certain people for reasons you can't explain, you sometimes need to take a look at yourself to see if it has anything to do with what you don't like about yourself. Celeste is that character.

Saint James is the only adult at Purgatory House. He sort of guides everyone along the way. He's like a teacher in some ways. He's a good guy, but Silver and the rest of the kids don't realize it. Unlike some of the other characters, which were kind of based upon people I knew, I didn't model his character after anyone in my life. He just somehow turned out the way he did. Actually, a lot of the story happened that way.

Purgatory House is told in four separate timelines: Earth, Purgatory, Dreams, and Flashbacks. Earth is where Silver's friends and family are now that she's gone. It's the world she has left behind. It's her old life going on without her. It's what she sees on the giant television set in her school cell. It's

the parallel universe that is continuing to happen while she exists at Purgatory House. The Purgatory House timeline is Silver's afterlife. This is where she will spend the rest of eternity, having been sentenced to remain the same forever. But to her, it isn't Purgatory—it is Hell. The dream sequences are filled with a stream of thoughts passing through her mind. They seem random, but they really mean something very deep. Her dreams are actually really spectacular! God uses them as a tool to help her see the big picture. Silver's memories from when she was alive and what happened before she died are told through flashbacks. In these flashbacks, she mostly remembers things that she wishes had never happened. These are all the things that happened to her and led to her decision to leave everything behind.

When I think of life, I guess that's really how I perceive things. We live here on Earth, and I believe that there is some sort of an afterlife. Dreams really do mean things in our everyday lives, and flashbacks are like "day-dreaming memories"—things that have happened in the past. It's weird because I never realized that I thought any

of these things in the screenplay or about myself until I finished writing. I guess that's the way I imagined it because that's the way I really do think life is.

When I was 13 years old, I felt as if people were constantly trying to turn me into somebody that I wasn't. People were always telling me to shut up and were always questioning me and asking me why I did the things that I did. Life was not easy. I had changed schools a bunch of times trying to find some real friends who accepted me for who I was. I had been through the ropes of public schools, but I entered a totally new world when I switched to a private, Lutheran middle school. Even though I still felt that I wasn't understood by anyone, I relied on my notebook. I wrote everything in that notebook: my feelings, my life stories, my thoughts, and my fantasies. Whenever I finished reading what I wrote, I always felt as if I had accomplished something, and that it was truly unique.

The idea for *Purgatory House* came to me while I was cleaning my extremely messy bedroom. Whenever I want clarity in my life, I always feel as if my cluttered bedroom is the problem. It's a good place

to start. It's usually a mess, and it drives me crazy. I was in my room, and as I stood there analyzing the disaster around me, I had this thought: What if people looking for a way out of reality got stuck with their problems forever? So I started writing and couldn't put my pen down.

I went to school the next day unable to think about anything but my new story. I passed it to a good friend of mine, and she loved it. She seemed to really understand it and relate to it. That made me want to keep on going with my story and continuing to write. That night I called another friend and told her that I had an idea that was going to change my life forever, but I couldn't tell her over the phone because I feared my neighbors would hear the conversation and take my idea. So I ran to her house to tell her. I relayed the story to her in the best words I could think of, and she thought it was insane—that I was insane for coming up with such an idea. I don't blame her really. I've always been the strange one out of the two of us. But when I read it to my "big sister," Cindy Baer, she thought it was brilliant. She was intrigued with my story and couldn't stop talking about it.

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She noticed that I had written the story in dialogue and suggested that I write it as a script, which isn't as easy as it sounds. But once I did, Cindy ended up turning my idea into a dream come true.

I met Cindy when I was 11 years old through the Big Sisters of Los Angeles Program. Big Sisters has a mentors' program that matches young girls like me with older "Big" sisters to act as role models. We've been inseparable since we met. She has been the greatest influence in my life and has done so much for me and helped me in so many ways. If it weren't for her, I'd be a completely different person. I don't know exactly *how* I would be different, but I know she's definitely changed my life for the better. One thing is for sure—I never would have made this movie. Cindy directed and produced this project and helped me accomplish everything. She believed that I could do anything I dreamed of even though I didn't think I was strong enough.

Have you ever been able to not stop thinking about something that happened in the past that you wish never would have happened? Silver's consumed emotions in *Purgatory House*

is about regret and sadness. I never realized any of these things about me or the screenplay until I started filming the movie.

When I started writing, I dreamed that *Purgatory House* would become a real movie; and I would star in it. But I never told anyone. Maybe that's why I wrote Silver's character the way I did, totally honest and not holding anything back. I really wanted to play the role of Silver—I just couldn't see it any other way. Besides, starring in a movie that you wrote is the ultimate experience—you get to be on the set and you rarely forget your lines.

After working on the story for a while, I decided to give it a break. Then after some time, I told myself that I had to finish it. But when I looked for it, I discovered it was gone. I still don't know what happened to it. So I basically had to start all over, but luckily everything I wrote was tattooed in my brain. The process of coming up with the idea, sitting on it, losing it, and doing it all over again took about a year.

At that time, I was going through a really difficult time with my family, and I was trying to figure out what was going on. I had gone to another new public school and then I ended up staying at a teen shelter for a little while. I didn't know what to do with my

life until Cindy came to the rescue. "Let's make *Purgatory House* a movie," she said. And that's just what we did. She spent weeks typing the story in correct script format, and she helped me put it all together.

I have learned so much from this experience. I didn't have any discipline in my life until I started making this movie. I also now know that there really is joy and happiness—you just have to find the strength and motivation to create what you want (and it isn't easy). Now I have something to be proud of. I can look at the people who put me down and teased me, and think to myself, "I am so happy that you are alive because if it wasn't for the stuff that you put me through, I wouldn't be me. I'd be a square!" What I mean by that is that they always acted as if something was wrong with me. They constantly judged me without knowing who I really was. Maybe I was a little crazy and strange, but I've grown up a bit now; and none of it really bothers me anymore. I'm happy that I wasn't afraid, and I didn't conform to being like all of those people. Although it was difficult at first, I now realize that they made me strive to do something that is out-of this world. The best things don't come easy. That's why they

are so beautiful and special.

Even after this experience, I continue to question myself. What do I want to do with my life now? I'm still writing (help me! I can't stop!), and working on a comedy called *Gutter Kids*, a story I began writing before *Purgatory House*. I have been trying to put a book of poems together for about a year now, and I really want to start a rock band soon. But wait a minute. I'm forgetting something else that I should be working on. What is it? ... Oh yes ... high school. Ugh! (i)

Celeste Davis attends high school in Van Nuys, Calif. and lives with her father, stepmother, and baby brother, Charlie. She enjoys painting, drawing and writing. She first realized her love for writing when she won an award in the fifth grade—she's been writing creatively ever since.

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