

HERE'S WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT



Purgatory House

A FEATURE FILM WRITTEN ENTIRELY BY A 14-YEAR-OLD GIRL

WINNER OF 11 FESTIVAL AWARDS
2-TIME PRISM AWARD NOMINEE

“ONE OF THE YEAR’S BEST FILMS”

CBS RADIO, ENTERTAINMENT INSIDERS, FILM THREAT, EFILMCRITIC

“Amazing! Brilliant! A cinematic gem that demands to be seen.”

Todd David Schwartz, CBS RADIO

“Put the names of Cindy Baer and Celeste Davis on the V.I.P. list of promising new filmmakers.”

FILM FREAK CENTRAL

“An exceptional work.”

GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

“A charming, touching, clever and all-around brilliantly crafted film.”

FILM THREAT

“*Purgatory House* contains a creativity scarcely seen in multiplexes...”

THE CINEMATIC VERSES

“Rarely have emotions rung as true as they do in this film.”

THE NUMBERS

“One of the best films about troubled teens that I have ever seen.”

Terry Keefe, Editor-at-Large, VENICE MAGAZINE

“Phenomenal, spectacular! This film has to be seen!”

Laura Ziskin, producer (SPIDERMAN, AS GOOD AS IT GETS, PRETTY WOMAN)

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Purgatory House

A FEATURE FILM WRITTEN ENTIRELY BY A 14-YEAR-OLD GIRL

“Like a passionately scribbled diary entry, this phantasmagoric tale... brims with all the heartfelt spiritual bewilderment and deep thoughts that only a teenage girl would, or could, voice.”

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

“It is refreshing to see someone take a chance on being different. A more refined script or production would have ruined this film completely. This film deserves to be watched and owned.”

HOME THEATER INFO

“Engaging and provocative, this film asks us to reconsider the adolescent experience from a perspective that is sincerely youthful, marked by a candid admission of the unknown, an optimistic determination to find fulfillment, and rarest of all, a critical examination of the morals and mores that are foisted upon young people today.”

Timothy Shary, WORCESTER MOVIES

“One of the most honest, most powerful, most revealing teen movies ever.”

FLICK FILOSPHER

“Fascinating to absorb and compelling to contemplate.”

EFILMCRTIC

“A provocative, creative film that explores sensitive subject matter skillfully.”

THE CINEMATIC VERSES

“An excellently constructed ... sophisticated, inventive feature.”

LA INDEPENDENT

“Imaginative and deeply touching.”

NOHO LA MEGAZINE

“A smart, inventive film.”

HOLLYWOOD INDEPENDENT NEWS

“A worthwhile experience for anyone who claims to be a fan of indie films in their truest form. An effort of love, which has an extremely important message for not only any and all teenagers, but their parents as well.”

DIGITALLY OBSESSED

A FEATURE WRITTEN BY A 14-YEAR-OLD GIRL.

Purgatory House

CAN YOU SEE ME?

FREE DREAM PICTURES PRESENTS
PURGATORY HOUSE

INTRODUCING **CELESTE DAVIS** AS SILVER STRAND

WITH **DEVIN WITT** **JOHNNY PACAR** **RHIANNON MAIN**

AND **JIM HANKS** AS SAINT JAMES

CASTING BY **KATRINA GOURLEY** ORIGINAL SCORE BY **JOHN SWIHART**

COSTUME DESIGNERS **CAMILLE RADINA & LISA HOUCK**

PRODUCTION DESIGNER **JAMES W. THOMPSON JR.** EDITOR **K.J. GRUCA**

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY **CHRISTOPHER S. NIBLEY**

ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS **MATTHEW IRVING & TRACI GLODERY**

WRITTEN BY **CELESTE DAVIS** PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY **CINDY BAER**

WWW.PURGATORYHOUSE.COM



Purgatory House heralds the arrival of a fresh new voice in American narrative. Written by and starring 14-year-old Celeste Davis, this semi-autobiographical feature is a living breathing snapshot of how it feels to be a teen in today's world, undiluted by adult sensibility. Told darkly with quirky, fantastical elements, **Purgatory House** begins where most stories end as it chronicles the after-life existence of Silver Strand: a lonely teenage girl who has abandoned her life of turmoil and drug addiction in search of unconditional love. Located somewhere between Heaven and Hell, the Purgatory House is a shelter for dead, wayward teens – a haunting parallel to the world she was trying to leave behind. Silver must choose whether she will accept her drab existence or discover within herself the power to change. Revealed in non-linear fashion and peppered with moments of visionary wonder, this groundbreaking digital feature dances delicately between childhood and adulthood, between worlds both real and dreamed.

"Fascinating to absorb and compelling to contemplate."

EFILMCRITIC

"A charming, touching, clever and all-around brilliantly crafted film."

FILM THREAT

"Original and unforgettable." **ENTERTAINMENT INSIDERS**

Director Cindy Baer and writer/star Celeste Davis were paired in the Big Sisters of Los Angeles program when Celeste was 11-years-old and have been inseparable ever since. By the age of 13 Celeste had lost interest in school, and felt disconnected with most of the relationships in her life. Longing to connect with something, she began to write *Purgatory House*; a screenplay portraying her challenges to fit in, cope with peer pressure, avoid drinking and drugs, and find meaning for her existence. When Celeste turned 14 and landed herself in a teen runaway shelter, she felt lost. In order to give her something positive to focus on, Cindy decided to produce *Purgatory House* as a movie that Celeste could star in. Now it appears that Celeste may be the youngest sole credited screenwriter to have a feature produced.

Purgatory House features over 200 ambitious visual effects including extensive blue and green screen shots which were composited into virtual and real sets. Because it is generally assumed that miniDV does not have the high resolution needed to support such compositing, *Purgatory House* breaks new ground in this area.

With the recent advancement of digital technologies, filmmaking has finally become an accessible medium of expression for anyone with a vision. Written by a high school freshman, and created with digital cameras and home-based computers, *Purgatory House* marks the true beginning of the digital revolution. From what it reveals about the pressures and struggles that plague our troubled youth, to the cutting-edge technologies that helped create it, *Purgatory House* is uniquely a sign of our times.

97 min, Color, USA © Free Dream Pictures
(818) 763-5299 www.purgatoryhouse.com



**"Phenomenal, spectacular!
This film has to be seen!"**

Laura Ziskin, producer

(SPIDERMAN, AS GOOD AS IT GETS, PRETTY WOMAN)

**"An amazing movie, like nothing I've
ever seen done before. It could have
a profound effect on teenagers."**

Martha Frankel, Celebrity Journalist

PURGATORY HOUSE

SYNOPSIS

Purgatory House heralds the arrival of a fresh new voice in American narrative. Celeste Davis was 14 years old when she wrote the screenplay, and 15 when she starred in this semi-autobiographical digital feature. As a result, *Purgatory House* is a living, breathing snapshot of how it feels to be a teen in today's world, undiluted by adult sensibility. Told darkly with quirky, fantastical elements, *Purgatory House* is about the choices teens make and the consequences they face in an all-too-real existence where the presence of drugs, suicide, and guns in school are a part of everyday life. And death.

At once a confused fantasy of self-discovery and a startlingly aware portrait of lost innocence, *Purgatory House* begins where most stories end as it chronicles the afterlife journey of Silver Strand: a lonely teenage girl who has abandoned her life of turmoil and drug addiction in search of unconditional love. As she watches the people she used to know, in voyeuristic moments glimpsed over a giant television set, Silver begins to realize that there are some things from which you cannot run away.

Located somewhere between Heaven and Hell, the Purgatory House is a shelter for dead, wayward teens. The haunting parallel between this oddly familiar place and the world she was trying to escape makes Silver question the very nature of freedom itself. She must choose whether she will accept her drab existence, or discover within herself the power to change. Her guides along the road to self-enlightenment include God herself (a drag-queen/game-show host played by Jim Hanks), a wry Saint (also played by Jim Hanks), and a group of fellow lost souls condemned to the Purgatory House.

Director Cindy Baer has taken great care in preserving the unpolished naiveté and raw innocence of adolescence while delivering a stylish, compelling narrative. The ambitious visual effects of *Purgatory House*, which include extensive blue and green screen compositing and computer animation sets a new standard for what can be accomplished in the miniDV format.

Told in non-linear fashion and peppered with moments of visionary wonder, this groundbreaking digital feature dances delicately between childhood and adulthood, between worlds both real and dreamed.

(USA, Color, 96 min.)

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

A note from director Cindy Baer

Celeste Davis, the 14-year-old writer of PURGATORY HOUSE, and I were matched through the Big Sisters of Los Angeles program in 1997, when Celeste was 11 years old. On the day we met, we were amazed to discover that we both had cats named Cali. As time would unfold, we came to realize that it was no coincidence at all that our lives were brought together, and that this would be the start of something much larger than just the two of us.

Celeste had little interest in school, and struggled to get good grades. She also struggled with her home life and friendships. Time was slowly dragging by. She was waiting for the days to pass, to grow up, and to be free. She liked to do artistic things like paint, draw and write. She began to write a story, which paralleled her own life in certain ways; her search to fit in, to avoid the teen drug culture, to get along with people, to find meaning for her life, and to find her Higher Power. In other ways it was an uncensored look at what a teenage girl would fantasize about; being powerful, boys liking you, people being sad if you were gone, feeling wanted, and the fear of making wrong choices. I was amazed at how clearly I could see the influence of the society we live in today reflected back at me through this newly 13-year-old girl. It was shocking.

When Celeste came to me with the first version of her story I was astonished. Never having learned story structure, she had created her own. The subtext leaped off the page, and the symbolism was profound. As shocking and saddening as I found the content, I encouraged her to continue her writing uncensored; not thinking of how it might be received and judged by others, but from her soul – as a true expression of what was inside. She would come to me every now and then and we would brainstorm a plot point. A few months later, I typed it up for her – and low and behold – with a little twist here and a tuck there, we had a feature length screenplay.

In the summer of 2001, an amazing cast and crew came together for an 18-day shoot, and turned Celeste's screenplay into a real movie. As the director I had 2 main goals: First was to keep Celeste's voice (and script) completely intact. Second was to make it so the audience would be continually aware of our young writer's voice while watching the movie. A mini-DV approach was taken, no dialogue was improvised, and I cast Celeste in the lead role to tell her own story.

Purgatory House is a living, breathing snapshot of how it feels to be a teen in a fast-paced, media-saturated world – undiluted by adult sensibility. I see this film as an amazing opportunity for all of us. It's a wake-up call.

Purgatory Houses are here on earth. Can we help our kids find the way out?



Celeste Davis and Cindy Baer were matched through the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program.

Photo by Lauren Virdone



14-year-old writer/actress Celeste Davis and director/producer Cindy Baer.

Photo by Lauren Virdone

THE SPIRIT OF TODAY'S TEEN



Digging Deeper

At its core, *Purgatory House* is about a lonely teen searching for a connection to a higher power. It is a philosophical, thought-provoking movie that inspires conversations about the choices we make in our lives, and the results that come from those choices. Beginning where most stories end, *Purgatory House* chronicles the after-life spiritual journey of Silver Strand, a 14-year-old girl who tries to escape her life of drug addiction in search of unconditional love. Instead she finds herself caught somewhere between Heaven and Hell, where she must finally decide if she will accept her drab existence or find within herself the power to change.

Purgatory House focuses on a topic that is seldom addressed in today's fast paced world: Teen Spirituality. While many films dramatize the symptoms, this film focuses on the root causes.

What is the spiritual state of today's American teen?

Sometimes it seems like today's American society can value "things" more than people. We worship beauty and violence, and then wonder why our kids are expressing themselves through mind-numbing drugs and eating disorders, and by showing up at schools with guns. Are we losing touch with each other? Have we forgotten what is meaningful? More and more parents are absent (literally or figuratively), and the media has become our children's babysitter, role model and higher power. Many kids don't feel important or valued, and are left too often to television, movies, video games, and the Internet for companionship and character development. And then to perpetuate the problem, many films about teens today offer sexy, shocking and idealistic images without depicting realistic consequences to actions.

When Celeste Davis first came up the idea for *Purgatory House* at the age of 13, which professed the premise of "maybe I'd be happier if I killed myself" director Cindy Baer was taken back. This story felt like she was speaking not just for herself, but for an entire generation of kids who felt lost in the same way she did.

It is our hope that this young writer's reflections on life (and death) might open some doors that could bring us all a little closer.

FREE DREAM PICTURES PRESENTS

Purgatory House

14-year-old screenwriter Celeste Davis stars in this life-after-death fantasy opposite Jim Hanks (BABY GENIUSES), Johnny Pacar (Disney's "NOW YOU SEE IT"; NBC's "Flight 29 Down") and Devin Witt.

Also look for cameos by Brian Dietzen (NCIS) and Nikolette Noel. Featuring amazing music from Natalie Merchant, Blue Oyster Cult, Violent Femmes, Grammy-nominated Eric Bazilian, and other top recording artists.

Directed by Cindy Baer.

WINNER of 11 Festival Awards, and 2-time PRISM Award Nominee.

Produced and Directed by: CINDY BAER

Written by: CELESTE DAVIS

Associate Producers: MATTHEW IRVING & TRACI GLODERY

Director of Photography: CHRISTOPHER S. NIBLEY

Production Designer: JAMES W. THOMPSON, JR.

Edited by: K.J. GRUCA

Supervising Sound Editor: LYNETTE VILLALOBOS

Music Composed by: JOHN SWIHART

Press Contact: Cindy Baer · 818-415-6110 · info@purgatoryhouse.com

PRESS PHOTOS

(please contact info@purgatoryhouse.com for high resolution images)



14-year old writer/actress Celeste Marie Davis
in PURGATORY HOUSE.

frame blow-up



Silver (Celeste Marie Davis) and Atticus (Devin Witt)
share an intimate moment in PURGATORY HOUSE.

Photo by Cindy Baer



God (played by Jim Hanks) on a virtual set
in PURGATORY HOUSE.

frame blow-up



Johnny (Scott Clark), Silver (Celeste Marie Davis)
and Sam (Johnny Pacar) hanging out
in PURGATORY HOUSE.

frame blow-up



Silver is unhappy on Earth.

frame blow-up



Silver dreams of being free.

frame blow-up

PURGATORY HOUSE

BIOGRAPHIES

CINDY BAER – Director / Producer

Cindy performed in 19 stage plays, including "The Diary of Anne Frank," "Fiddler on the Roof," "Biloxi Blues," "Candide" and Jack Neary's "Ask a Nice Girl" before moving to Los Angeles in 1992. At 23, she combined her theatrical ability with a keen business sense to create Daizy the Clown and Company; one of the most highly regarded children's entertainment companies in the L.A. area. During that time, her favorite theatre credits included Essie in The Pasadena Shakespeare Company's critically acclaimed production of "You Can't Take It With You," and Jill Tanner in the 30th anniversary production of Leonard Gershe's "Butterflies are Free" at the Matrix Theatre in Hollywood. When Cindy joined The Big Sisters of Los Angeles Program and was matched with an 11-year-old "little sister" named Celeste Davis, she had no idea that together they would soon create a feature project called *Purgatory House*. PURGATORY HOUSE was Cindy's debut as a feature director. Cindy's recent film acting credits include the roles of Lizzie Borden in the upcoming horror film LIZZIE and Jillian (playing the girlfriend of Rainn Wilson) in FEW OPTIONS.

CELESTE DAVIS – Screenwriter / "Silver Strand"

Celeste received an award for creative writing at the age of 10, and has been writing ever since. Although she was always attracted to the written word, Celeste had little interest in school. At the age of 13, she found herself surrounded by the teen drug culture, feeling disconnected from most of the relationships in her life, and missing her mother, whom she had not seen in over a year. Longing to connect with something, she began to write *Purgatory House*; a screenplay which portrayed her struggles to fit in, cope with peer pressure, find meaning in her life, and create a relationship with herself and a higher power. When Celeste turned 14 and landed herself in a teen runaway shelter, she felt lost. That's when the decision came to produce *Purgatory House* as a movie. Her escape would be through creativity and art. With "Big Sister" Cindy Baer as her mentor, Celeste completed her first feature-length screenplay only a few weeks later. Never having acted before PURGATORY HOUSE, Celeste made her acting debut at the age of 15, as the lead character of Silver Strand. Now it appears that Celeste may be the youngest sole credited screenwriter to have a feature produced.

JIM HANKS – "Saint James"

Film credits include SWING, BABY GENIUSES, THE POLAR EXPRESS and ODD BRODSKY. TV credits include guest-starring roles on "Jag", "Lois and Clark" and "Sabrina, the Teenage Witch". And yes...Jim is every bit as talented as his older brother Tom!

JOHNNY PACAR – "Sam"

Johnny had only been living in Los Angeles for 3 months when he was cast in PURGATORY HOUSE and he's been working ever since! His extensive credits include the starring role in the Disney original movie "Now You See It" and the TV series' "Flight 29 down" and "Make It or Break It".

BRIAN DIETZEN – "Ghost"

After Brian's cameo in PURGATORY HOUSE he later went on to become a series regular on NCIS playing the role of Jimmy Palmer. Other film credits include FROM JUSTIN TO KELLY and KARA OKE MAN.

NIKOLLETTE NOEL – "Student"

Long before Nikolette landed roles in THE EXPENDABLES 2, MUSIC HIGH and TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE 3D, one of her first speaking roles was in PURGATORY HOUSE!

JOHN SWIHART – Composer

After PURGATORY HOUSE, Award winning composer John Swihart went on to score the Grammy nominated indie smash hit NAPOLEON DYNAMITE and over 40 feature films and over a dozen TV shows including "How I Met Your Mother".



Her name is Silver.

Silver. Say it, shout it, yell it, sell it. Silver. Too late. She's already been cheated. She's gone, but not forever. There's a place, God has a face. Not the one you think you know. Where do you go when you are done? Silver, Silver, lamb of God, Satan loves you too. Her old life races on. Father, Son, Holy Ghost, dressed in drag, is this our host? Turn down that TV. Has he got E? Get that shit away from me. We are here. Does it look fun? Where do you go when you are gone?

We are done.

We are one sad, pathetic, messed up, juiced up, riled up, youthful society.

Purgatory House

A feature written by a 14-year-old girl

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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Hollywood's Youngest Screenwriter

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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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SUNDAY

NEW YORK POST



Teen Celeste Davis wrote and stars in "Purgatory House."

A helluva film debut

WELCOME to purgatory. No, not the one they talk about in church. This one is the product of the fertile mind of a teenage girl.

She's Celeste Davis, who at age 15 has already written and starred in a feature film, "Purgatory House," which makes its world debut this week at the Woodstock Film Festival.

Davis plays Silver Strand, a lonely teen who commits suicide. When it comes time to meet God, He/She turns out to be a drag queen (played by Tom Hanks' brother Jim).

Since suicide is a no-no, he sentences bleached-blond Silver to spend eternity in Purgatory House. There she's doomed to remain 14 forever and to watch her family and friends going through life without her.

So why is her God a drag queen?

"I didn't know what God was. Would God be a man? Would God be a woman? Why not make God a man dressed like a woman?" the California high school student explained via e-mail.



V.A. Musetto
Cine File

plained via e-mail.

Celeste admits that part of the script is autobiographical — "except that Silver is a more extreme version of who I am."

"A lot of the flashbacks are based on my own life. I really wanted to show how drugs are just *everywhere* in school. You cannot get away from it, even if you want."

The movie's director/producer is Cindy Baer, who four years ago was matched with Celeste — the product of a dysfunctional family — through the Big Sisters of Los Angeles, which pairs "at risk" girls with female mentors.

Celeste said the idea for "Purgatory House" came when "I was cleaning my messy bedroom one night."

"I hated cleaning, and I thought how horrible it would be after you died to get stuck doing over and over all the things you hated back on earth."

"Or worse, to be 14 forever. To never grow and change. To never learn or find a way to be happy."

"Purgatory House" is one of 130 features and shorts unreeling at the fourth edition of the Woodstock fest.

It kicks off Wednesday and runs through next Sunday, with screenings in the upstate hippie haven and in nearby Rhinebeck, Hunter and Mount Tremper.

Some of the other entries are John Sayles' "Casa de los Babys," with Maggie Gyllenhaal, Daryl Hannah, Marcia Gay Harden and Lily Taylor; Denys Arcand's "Les Invasions Barbares"; Michael Almereyda's "This So Called Disaster"; and Billy Ray's "Shattered Glass," featuring Hayden Christensen as real-life disgraced journalist Stephen Glass.

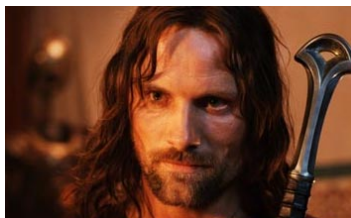
See www.woodstockfilmfestival.com for the full schedule.

V.A. Musetto is film editor of *The Post*. He can be e-mailed at vam@nypost.com.



BEST OF 2003: We saw them everywhere and you should seek them out. The list below includes films we saw this year at festivals, in the multiplex on the corner of suburban America, and in the comfort of our homes courtesy of an earnest filmmaker or an agent devoted to a labor of love. Unlike other lists that focus on films actually released in the theaters in 2003, we list films that may be hard to find but will be worth the trouble finding.

ENTERTAINMENT INSIDERS' BEST FILMS OF 2003



1. Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King

Sometimes it can be harder to get it right with unlimited funds especially when expectations are through the stratosphere. *ROTK*, a sprawling 3 hour and 20 minute, intermissionless epic is really the best movie of the year on many levels. Peter Jackson gets high marks for being mature enough to spend a good half an hour wrapping up the various story-lines.

2. Seabiscuit

Seabiscuit was a thrilling little yarn that felt real and why not, it's based on a true story. The appeal of horses is combined beautifully with the story of an underdog in *Seabiscuit* producing drama that was as moving as anything I saw this year (and easily one-upped in the entertainment department the limp *Matrix* sequels). *Seabiscuit* was smartly packaged with a star-studded cast led by Jeff Bridges (who ages well in the story), a pencil thin Tobey Maguire, and the newly minted Oscar winner Chris Cooper (who has had a knack for choosing good roles over the years, anyone remember *Lone Star*).

3. Les Invasions Barbares (The Barbarian Invasions)

My sentimental favorite film of 2003 was *Les Invasions Barbares (The Barbarian Invasions)*. Denys Arcand told me that when he was having a hard time writing the script, which tells the story of a man dying of cancer and attempting to reconcile his relationship with his estranged son, Arcand decided to go back to a character from his past films (principally 1986's *The Decline of the American Empire*). That character, the larger than life Remy, enabled Arcand to breathe a little humor into the sad story. The result is a subtle masterpiece that sensitive moviegoers will find engaging.

4. Purgatory House/Thirteen

2003 was the year of the tween movie, films searching for the real often shockingly lurid example of young people, particularly girls, on the edge of the teenage experience. Director Cindy Baer's *Purgatory House* smartly tapped into this growing sub-genre. Blending reality with an experimental flair (smartly toying around with the story-line jumping from one time and reality to another dimension between Heaven and earth), *Purgatory House* raised questions regarding faith and the existence of God. Written by then 13-year-old Celeste Davis who also makes an astonishing debut as its little star appropriately named Silver Strand, *PH* was the coolest tween offering of 2003.



digitally **OBSESSED!**
dare to be... DIFFERENT

PURGATORY HOUSE

DVD Review

The differences between old-school independent films and those of the Miramax variety are plentiful, with the two forms having grown more diverse in recent years. The commercialization of independent film can be rather easily attributed to the success of such films at the Oscars, but there are still throngs of unsuccessful though devoted filmmakers who will get their vision to a screening room regardless of the obstacles. One such visionary is 14-year-old writer/actor Celeste Davis, whose pet project, *Purgatory House*, is a worthwhile experience for anyone who claims to be a fan of indie films in their truest form.

Silver Marie Strand (Davis) has recently committed suicide, and now resides in a strange house with other wayward teens. Strand is able to view the outside world via a video feed, and she sees things that cause her to reflect upon not only her own life but those closest to her as well. Between the video feeds and interaction with her fellow residents of this halfway house, Strand sees her life from an entirely new perspective, but it might be too late to save her soul.

While it's easy to argue that such a young person isn't the best source to ruminate on the complexities of life, it's also just as easy to argue that she's the perfect person for such a subject. Seemingly generating much of the story from her own experiences and feelings about teenage life, Celeste Davis shows just enough polish and discipline to make the screenplay tight, interesting, and most importantly, entertaining, which enables the director to turn in a nice little film. There are some lulls in the story and the symbolism is a bit overdone at times, but if Davis can follow this up with a more complex story, she's going to be a force to reckon with in the years to come.

Using a cast of unknowns, director Cindy Baer gets wonderful efforts from all. Jim Hanks (who has a much more famous older brother) does a great job as God, and there are also nice turns from Devin Witt and Johnny Pacar. Still, the big revelation here is Davis. An actor playing the lead in her own story can seem a bit narcissistic, but it becomes apparent early on that having anyone else play Silver Strand would have been a mistake. Davis performs well beyond her years, exhibiting amazing maturity while keeping in touch with her adolescence. Her work is the perfect balance between passion and passiveness, as she depicts Silver as someone truly in purgatory, forced to reflect on her life and those around her in the most direct way imaginable. The heck with Dakota Fanning; this is as gripping as it gets from a young actress.

This isn't the most balanced or finely-tuned indie feature to come along, but the best thing to come out of it is the massive potential of all involved; much of the cast could very well show up in future projects by the dozens. Still, the proverbial straw that stirs this drink is Baer. I'm sure working creatively with a 14-year-old on a movie project isn't exactly what she is used to, but there are no signs of any disagreements between the two. This is an effort of love in simple, indie film form, which has an extremely important message for not only any and all teenagers, but their parents as well.

Rating for Style: B **Rating for Substance: B**

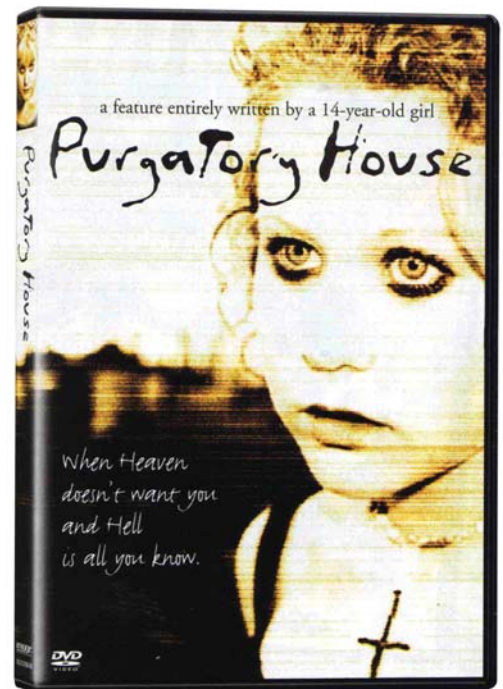


Image Transfer

Appearing in a non-anamorphic 1.78:1 widescreen presentation, the overall transfer was much better than expected. There's still quite a bit of dirt and grain, and some softness, but we also get our fair share of sharp, detailed images as well. Shadow and contrast levels hold up throughout, while the unique color palette is very nicely rendered.

Image Transfer Grade: B-

Audio Transfer

The surprising inclusion of a Dolby Digital 5.1 track takes the surreal audio to a level we don't expect from such low budget material. The surrounds are very active during the more fantastical sequences, taking us along for the ride on one of Silver Strand's mind trips. Davis' dialogue blends in well with the rest of the mix, remaining crisp and clear throughout.

Audio Transfer Grade: B+

Extras

The nice collection of extras begins with *The Making of Purgatory House*, a 31-minute piece featuring interviews with the young star and writer of the film, Celeste Davis. She goes into great detail about how reflective the film is of her own life, and gives us some nice tidbits about the shoot.

Putting It All Together runs just under 18 minutes and features talks with editor KJ Gruca, director/producer Cindy Baer, and associate producer Matthew Irving. They are shown watching dailies, and give us a look at the grueling task of editing a feature film.

There's also a three-minute music video for Claire's Prayer by Larisa Stow, as well as footage from the LA premiere. A pair of deleted scenes is also available, along with two trailers for the feature, the text-based Silver's Note, and a PSA involving the prevention of common teenage problems.

Extras Grade: B

Final Comments

A passion project in the truest sense, *Purgatory House* is a stunning look at teenagers and their struggles. The brain-child of 14-year-old Celeste Davis, this wunderkind not only wrote the screenplay, but also gives a powerful performance as the lead character. Image Entertainment's DVD makes this look and sound better than expected, and a decent extras collection gives us more insight into Ms. Davis' work on the project.

The Cinematic Verses

PURGATORY HOUSE

Review by: Matt Forsman (2004)

TCV Rating: EN (Enlightening)

MPAA Rating: R

Teen genre flicks such as *The Prince and Me*, *Mean Girls*, and the *American Pie* films often convey an image of teenage existence that is fluffy and saccharine. While conflict and angst may exist it's usually limited to the kind of pain associated with not getting asked to prom, getting dumped, or not getting laid. Then there are films like *Purgatory House*.

Cindy Baer's directorial debut stands in stark contrast to the aforementioned teen genre flicks. *Purgatory House* explores the isolation, alienation, and disenchantment that so many young adults feel and does so in a unique and creative way. Much of this creativity can be attributed to the brilliant young mind behind the script for the film. Penned by a 14 year old, Celeste Marie Davis, *Purgatory House* contains an originality scarcely seen in multiplexes.



Celeste Marie Davis as the star and architect of *Purgatory House*.

This creativity is manifested in Davis's vivid creation of a world in which suicide does not result in cessation of pain or suffering, but rather a repetitive and monotonous existence that is inescapable. The *Purgatory House* is a waystation for lost souls. No longer cared for by God, those who stay at *Purgatory House* are damned to eternal sameness.

Celeste Marie Davis's Silver Strand is the nucleus around which *Purgatory House* revolves. Prior to committing suicide, Strand felt alone, disconnected, and perpetually unhappy. Upon arriving at the *Purgatory House*, Strand finds little respite as she's forced to watch her family and friends mourning and moving on with their lives while she stays forever 14 and goes nowhere. For a teen who's anxious for any kind of change, few things are more insufferable than being sentenced to a bleak existence devoid of change.

For a debut performance, Davis does a great job of conveying the emptiness, despair, and loneliness that pervades Strand's being. Additionally, Davis aptly conveys a profound sense of regret in realizing all too late that she has succeeded only in hurting those who love her and blowing opportunities to make changes she so desperately wanted to make. There were some moments in which Davis appeared to be uncomfortable with some of the dialogue. But, these moments did little to take away from a solid interpretation of a complex and troubled young woman.

Equally solid is Cindy Baer's handling of a complex script that incorporates multiple timelines—Silver Strand when she was alive on Earth, Silver Strand at *Purgatory House*, and so forth. *Purgatory House* is likely the kind of material many directors would pass on for the technical complexity of executing something like this. Baer should be commended for her efforts in bringing things together relatively seamlessly.

Purgatory House is a provocative and creative film that explores sensitive subject matter skillfully. That being said, the film is not without flaws. The dialogue at times seems stilted and awkward. Likewise, there are moments in the film where the performances seem somewhat stilted perhaps reflecting the dialogue. However, these are minor flaws in a film that should be noticed for its originality in concept and delivery. What's even more remarkable is this is the first script young Davis has penned. If this is her first effort, I can only imagine what she can create given some more time to hone her voice and craft. *Purgatory House* is an enlightening film and perhaps a portent of great things to come.



PURGATORY HOUSE

DVD Review

The Movie:

Having never heard of *Purgatory House*, which was written by a 14-year-old girl, I was expecting a simplistic film. Instead, the film delivered complex themes of teen isolation, drug and alcohol abuse, as well as cutting, suicide and the afterlife, all while capturing exactly what it's like to be a teenager in this day and age.

To lay the groundwork for the film, one must first understand how it came to be. It all started when actress/director/producer Cindy Baer was paired with Celeste Davis through the Big Brothers Big Sisters program in Los Angeles when Davis was just 11 years old.

As their friendship grew, Davis' home life was unraveling – she was withdrawing from her father and step-mother, and losing interest in school and friends. By age 14, Davis was living in a teen shelter, and when Baer set about looking for a new project, she turned to Davis, knowing that the teen had been working on a script called *Purgatory House*. As the project came to fruition, Davis and Baer both became invested in the project in every sense of the word.

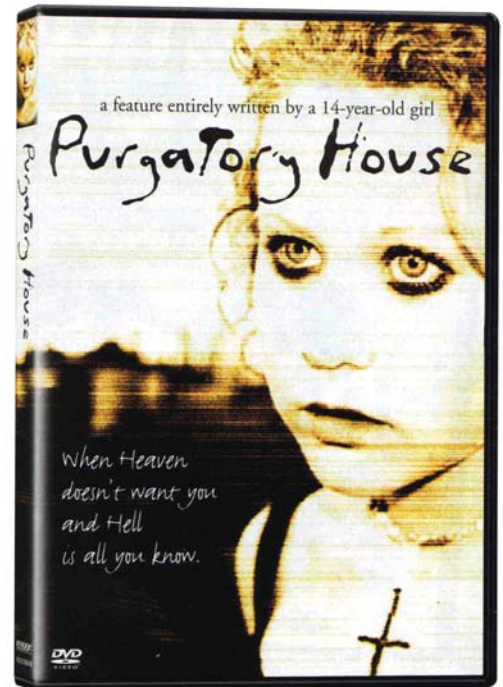
In the film, Davis, in her first feature-film role, portrays Silver Strand, a teen struggling to fit in and overcome the pressures today's youth face – drug, alcohol, sex and violence – but the struggle becomes more than she can bear, so she takes her own life.

Having failed at the game show "Who Wants To Go To Heaven?" and consequently not accepted into heaven, Strand is left in Purgatory, sentenced to watch everyone she left behind cope and move on.

In this Purgatory, those left behind are watched on "earth TV", Strand gets "torture breaks" throughout the day, and she is required to wear the same clothes and makeup she had on when she ended her life. She is also given an all-access pass to drugs and alcohol, which is pretty much just what she had on earth.

In Purgatory, God is a drag queen (played brilliantly by Jim Hanks, whose recent acting credits include the TV show *Scrubs*) and always referred to as "she". The cast is rounded out by a handful of fresh faces/newcomers, including Devin Witt as Atticus; Johnny Pacar as Strand's boyfriend Sam; and Eric Jester as Jessie.

Although this film was made on a shoestring budget, it's hard to tell with all the visual effects utilized. It features over 200 visual effects, including the use of both green and blue screen shots, and was filmed on miniDVD, which is new territory for filmmaking.





The DVD

Video: Shot with an XL15 digital camera, *Purgatory House* employs many interesting and creative visual techniques to create amazing special effects. The film is presented in widescreen in its 1.78:1 theatrical aspect ratio.

Sound: With the option of Dolby Digital 5.1 surround and 2.0 stereo, the sound quality of *Purgatory House* is exceptional. Plus, they use rockin' music, as well as original music by John Swihart.

Extras: This DVD is heavy on the extras, and they are well worth sitting through. "The Making of Purgatory House" tells the back story of the project, as well as explains the process Baer went through, having never made a film before. From casting, to hiring crew, to location scouting, this little-over-half-hour extra could be considered a crash course in making a low-budget film that doesn't appear low budget. That the 18-day shoot ended two days before 9/11 somehow seems fitting, given the nature of the film.

"Putting It All Together" explores what happened after the cameras stopped rolling and Baer had to sift through hundreds of hours of footage. The editing process, which took 10 weeks, was yet another crash course for Baer, but luckily that didn't stop her from employing every technique she could think of to create a visually innovative film. This extra also explained the choice of publicity for the film, as well as the music selections and mixing process.

Other extras include Claire's Prayer, a music video by Larisa Stow; footage from the Los Angeles' *Purgatory House* premiere; two deleted scenes; two trailers for *Purgatory House*; "Free Me" (an ad for thursdayschild.org); and, last but certainly not least, Silver's note/confession to her father, which was a nice touch, as it was referred to in the movie but the contents were never revealed (which, by the way, didn't hinder the plot).

Final Thoughts:

In one of my favorite scenes in the film, when a representative from the "Save a Life, Tell Someone" organization (played by director Baer) speaks to Strand's classmates about her suicide, it becomes evident that each student is carrying his or her own burden, be it anorexia, drug abuse, promiscuity, or even the pressure of keeping straight A's.

In the end, Strand must realize that any chance of a better life can only happen among the living. As God tells her, "If you wanted to change, you should have stayed there."

Juliet Farmer, aka writnkitten

**REVIEWS****Purgatory House****Director:** Cindy Baer**Starring:** Celeste Davis, Jim Hanks**Length:** 96 Minutes**Rated:** NR**Dreams of Purgatory**by Jonathan W. Hickman

"I know that if I were someone else, I wouldn't like me either," Silver Strand yells at her friend. She doesn't like herself. She wants to escape from this world. Suicide offers the means, but what if things don't change? What if after committing suicide, you are cursed to an eternity of sameness?

Director Cindy Baer's "Purgatory House" presents these "what if" questions offering answers cleverly packaged in an experimental film. I say experimental to warn the lot of you: THIS IS A VERY DIFFERENT MOVIE AND NOT FOR EVERYONE.



Veering into dry sardonic "Ghostworld" territory, "Purgatory House" begins with the end or something close to it. Our protagonist Silver Strand (Celeste Davis) is already dead. She now resides in a place appropriately called Purgatory House. She is surrounded by other youths who have in one way or another done things in life that resulted in their untimely demise. Each of her fellow inmates has their own story of woe American-style—children whose troubled emotions manifest in drug use and sexuality, culminating in death or suicide. According to Silver, the idea of Purgatory House originated with the Catholic Church and God thought it was such a good idea that "she" created it.

The fact that Silver refers to God as a female is interesting because once we meet God his/her sexual identity is masked. God is depicted as a drag queen and the host of a game show featuring the recently departed as contestants. Lose this game and you might find yourself in Hell. In Silver's case, she wins, well, kinda. She finds herself exiled to Purgatory House where she is given an eternity of drugs and will be forced to wear the same clothing she was wearing when she died. Basically, she will never change. The joke is that in seeking to escape, you end up condemning yourself forever to never escaping the person you were when you died. The perfect Hell is of your own making.

"Purgatory House" is an experimental film toying with structure and uses of different types of media (although it was shot exclusively in miniDV format). We get some kind of computer animation together with live action shot in color and black and white. The film intelligently balances this ambitious approach by providing both narration and a bit of titling that differentiates between the environments. For example, as part of her life (or existence) in Purgatory House, Silver is made to watch life on earth on a big screen television and in the corner of such screen we see the logo for "earthtv" much like the logos employed by today's television networks. Flashbacks that appear periodically throughout are annotated with a caption and shown in black and white. Whereas, earthtv is shot in clear color. The scenes in Purgatory House itself are also in color but there are presumably some filters used to make things appear somewhat out of focus that gives it the appearance of an unearthly realm.



Although slightly titillating, "Purgatory House" isn't exploitive. Avoiding the obvious conceits of other films about teens through the use of fantastical elements and original non-linear structure, the film held my attention and encouraged me to listen to its message of teen angst and confusion. While romanticized somewhat, there is truth in its story of teen sex, drug use, and violence. This is especially true since the original screenplay is said to have been penned by the 14 year-old star Celeste Davis. Davis' performance as Silver runs the gambit and for the most part works. There is something sincere about her gaze and sarcastic charm. She has the looks and spunk of Drew Barrymore or Meg Ryan. Jim Hanks (brother of Tom Hanks) plays the caretaker of the house as well as the drag queen game show host God. He is good as both—one reserved, the other off the hook.

The score is wonderful. It is composed of old rock hits and a few new tunes written for the film. Silver's drug overdose scene features the Violent Femmes classic "Kiss Off." Ironically, this song while perfect for the scene is older than Silver/Davis herself (man, I feel old). Filmmakers must be very careful when using pop music throughout their score because it may have the unintended effect of making serious scenes trite or turn the film into one big music video. Of course, examples where an older pop tune can make a scene classic abound. In "Purgatory House," music is important and helps to set the tone for the strangeness of the situations displayed.

While summer popcorn films like "Pirates of the Caribbean" have shown that American audiences will sit longer in the dark so long as their children are entertained, trends in American movie-goer tastes can create innovation. Thus, the result of this experimentation are movies like "Pulp Fiction" and more recently "Memento" (which is linear story-telling backwards). "Purgatory House" reminds me of "Natural Born Killers" with heart in that it employs different types of media (live action and computer generated footage) to tell its story. Its structure is modern and because of attention to detail, through use of captions, does not confuse. Ultimately, "Purgatory House" is original and unforgettable.

I have thought about Silver's statement to her friend about being someone else and not liking her either. Objectivity is based in being able to take off the rose-colored glasses and see things the way they really are or, at least, from a different perspective. One of the terrific ideas of "Purgatory House" is the ability to see things from the outside watching "earthtv" from purgatory. It is only when you truly see things from the other side's position that you can form your own opinions. Otherwise, you have only half the story and never change. Sameness is not only bad cinema, it makes for a bad life.

For more information about "Purgatory House" visit them on the Internet at www.purgatoryhouse.com.

Jonathan W. Hickman

DVD Review (by Rusty White)

Powerful film. Good picture, great sound and extras.

Picture Quality: 8/10

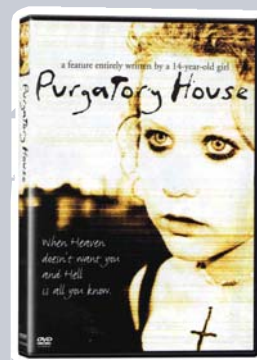
This has an Indie look, but what the hey, it is an Indie. Don't expect Hollywood Technicolor from the 1950s, but the transfer is great. It captures the director's original vision.

Sound Quality: 10/10

The movie features a great soundtrack. Both the 5.1 and 2.0 soundtracks are awesome.

Extra Features: 8/10

My only complaint: Why no commentary track? A 14-year-old writer/star and her older mentor director! That has the making of a great commentary track, especially for a film like this one. The DVD does include an in-depth Making Of featurette that answers some of the questions concerning the film. There is also a deleted scene, a music video and footage from the film's LA Premiere. I found the detailed look at the character Silver's suicide note to be the most interesting extra on the DVD.



The Final Word:

I'm so happy this powerful film is finally being released on DVD. As a parent, I was able to share it, with positive results with one of my children. Other parents in similar situations may also care to do so. I hope that folks who don't believe in Purgatory (like myself) will overlook the non-traditional doctrine that the writer hangs her story on, and let their kids see the movie for what it is. A strong condemnation of both drug use and suicide. The film doesn't preach from an adult POV. It speaks to teens from a fellow teen. Therein lies its power.

Purgatory House

*** 1/2 (out of 4)

Celeste Marie Davis, who gets my vote to play Neil Gaiman's cherubic Grim Reaper in the upcoming *Death: The High Cost of Living*, was 14 when she wrote the screenplay for *Purgatory House* and 15 when she starred in the film made from it. Although *Purgatory House* deserves to be discussed on its own terms apart from the obvious similarities between its genesis and that of Catherine Hardwicke's appalling *Thirteen* (which are all but irrelevant, though it's worth pointing out that *Purgatory House* does not deserve to be considered post-*Thirteen*, i.e. the first film to leech off its novelty, as they were concurrently produced), subjecting it to a Pepsi Challenge against *Thirteen* actually helps its cause.

In all honesty, the two pictures are as didactic as each other, but *Thirteen* is astonishingly hypocritical in the process: not only does its uncompromising gaze at modern vices serve to broaden the aspiring young hedonist's horizons (witness the barely-pubescent protagonist's hidden-in-plain-sight stash of sex toys, cementing *Thirteen* as a kind of gateway drug), the film also refuses to hold its teenage heroine accountable for her actions, framing her comeuppance as an ironic twist meant to further demonize her corruptor. At the risk of similarly exonerating Nikki Reed, *Thirteen's* glamour-puss co-screenwriter and co-star, it would seem that Hardwicke, her collaborator on the script and mother figure in life, was entirely too protective of Reed's on-screen avatar--a by-product, no doubt, of doing most of the typing.

Director Cindy Baer, an actress who became a "Big Sister" to Davis through the Los Angeles chapter of the program, is more conscientious about sending mixed messages than she is about implicating Davis in any wrongdoing (hence a critical pan away from an ecstasy tab being dropped), and *Purgatory House*, by avoiding the exploitation gestures that pass for truth in contemporary fiction, feels like a breath of fresh air with or without *Thirteen* entering the conversation. What Baer revels in is the guilelessness of Davis' screenplay, which remains palpably "undiluted by adult sensibility" (to quote the online literature) despite Baer's rigorous direction. (*Purgatory House* doesn't coddle or titillate its key demographic, but it does offer them the rare opportunity for communion.) Indeed, even Baer's intellectual aesthetic--a smorgasbord of Video Toaster'd, borderline-voyeuristic images that are refreshingly free of documentary posturing (the crutch du jour)--is by no means imposed on the film, moored as it is to Davis' trenchant conceit of the media as a constant filter through which the teenager observes and is observed.

After melancholy goth girl Silver Strand (Davis, a natural) deliberately O.D.s on pills in an intense sequence synchronized to Violent Femmes' "Kiss Off" ("Two, two, two for my family; Three, three, three for my heartache"), she is forced to compete for her fate on an episode of "Who Wants to Go to Heaven?", hosted by a transsexual God (charismatic Jim Hanks, essaying multiple roles à la brother Tom in *The Polar Express*). Far from a victim of the (lazy) topicality that curdles the *Shrek* movies, this irreverent parody--Silver's multiple-choice question is "Do I find it acceptable for 14-year-old kids to throw away the lives I so generously gave them?"--works as both a wily allusion to the church's lagging embrace of the zeitgeist and an introduction to the tantalizing suggestion that Silver is not dead at all, but rather having a lucid dream. (Note that in the afterlife, she's never really confronted with anything outside her ken.) Purgatory as an extrapolation of teenage ennui makes perfect sense.

The price of the movie's bracing authenticity is a certain elementariness, natch: while there's no resisting the spunk of high-school-playisms like a monologue in which Silver reduces her fellow Purgatorians to literal matchstick boys and girls (older viewers will be struck by nostalgia for the nascence of their analytical mind, younger ones will have epiphanies), the youthful impulse to be comprehensive gets the best of Davis in a glib passage that raises the spectres of Columbine and--in the extra-textual sense, at least--Paul F. Ryan's overreaching, overbearing *Home Room*. I wonder whether the power of the film's coda would've been so ineffable had *Purgatory House* not ultimately obscured the perhaps-hairline distinction between a teenager imploding and a teenager exploding--or dug deeper to find a common denominator. Still, the picture is achievement enough to put the names of Cindy Baer and Celeste Davis on the V.I.P. list of promising new filmmakers.

Bill Chambers – January 31, 2005



PURGATORY HOUSE

by Eric Campos

(2003-09-23)

2003, Un-rated, 96 Minutes, Free Dream Pictures



Dodging the nasty After School Special bullet, "Purgatory House" is a charming, touching, clever and all-around brilliantly crafted film about teen suicide. The key to its success? The story was written by a 14-year-old girl.

After committing suicide, Silver Marie Strand finds herself residing in the afterlife home of Purgatory House, the place between heaven and hell where suicides go. Purgatory House is shown to be a sort of psychiatric hospital with group sessions taking place daily. When not discussing their problems in group, each resident gets a torture session, which finds them sitting in front of a widescreen TV tuned into the lives of their friends and family as they have to deal, often clueless, with their deaths. Day in, day out, it's the same old routine, but Silver has the strength, not only to discover what a waste her death has been, but possibly a way to make amends.

A lot of that same strength resides within writer Celeste Marie Davis, who also plays Silver Marie Strand in the film. Several years ago, when Celeste was eleven-years-old, she was matched with actress Cindy Baer through the Big Sisters of Los Angeles program. As their relationship blossomed, Cindy realized what a major writing talent Celeste had. Striking her most was Celeste's story about a teenage girl who commits suicide and has to live for eternity in purgatory with her peers. Cindy knew this needed to be turned into a film, so she chose it as her directorial debut. Soon after, a 14-year-old Celeste was working on her first screenplay, a year later, she would star in the leading role.

The result is something that filmmakers trying to reach teenagers have fumbled for years...forever actually. The reason why those old After School Specials were always so fake and even humorous was because you could tell that there was some old fart behind a camera trying to convey a "hard-hitting" message he was hired to push upon you. These films were stale just as they were being filmed. And they mostly always starred people you would see on "Circus of the Stars" the following Friday, jumping through a ring of fire with a tiger hot on their tail. These films basically served for background entertainment while real kids did drugs in front of them. But "Purgatory House" presents its story of troubled youth honestly from a writer who knows best. If all After School Specials were like this, maybe we wouldn't have had so many teen suicides in the past.



the flick philosopher

cinematic musings by maryann johanson

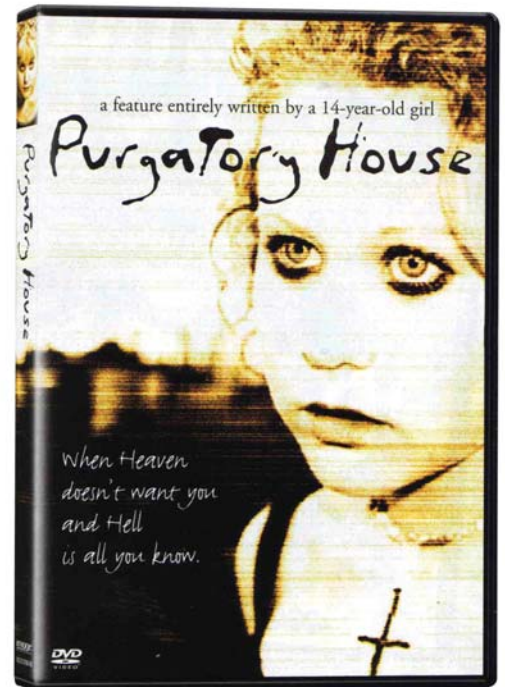
PURGATORY HOUSE

DVD Review

If you've forgotten what it was like to be a teenager, here's a way to slam yourself back into that miserably, lonely, awkward time: Visit *Purgatory House*, new on DVD on January 16. Written, astonishingly, by then 14-year-old Celeste Davis, this is the heartrending semiautobiographical story of a teen desperate to escape her pain who ends up in a place even worse, halfway between heaven and hell in the fantastical Purgatory House, a supernatural shelter for kids on the edge.

Shot in the summer of 2001 on miniDV cameras with FX produced on home computers, this is a breakthrough for digital filmmaking, a stunningly innovative example that pushes the boundaries of what inexpensive new technology can create and allowing director Cindy Baer brings a just-right touch of dark whimsy to Davis's inspired invention of a realm of the afterlife dedicated to the eternally wretched. But it's Davis herself that is the most extraordinary aspect of the film. Starring as Silver Strand, the latest kid to find herself crashing forever at Purgatory House, she is a phenomenally gifted and self-assured screenwriter and screen performer who is able to articulate the precise shadings of adolescent anger and despair that we all strive hard to forget as soon as we can... which tends to dull the edges of stories about teens told through the haze of adult perspectives.

The searing, unblunted immediacy of Davis's experience – and the startling maturity of her satirical wit – makes this one of the most honest, most powerful, most revealing teen movies ever. Kids may dismiss the truth of it as self-evident, even if the way in which that truth is told is highly rewarding in itself, but those of us who've left adolescence behind, and good riddance to it, will be smacked out of our smug adulthood and back in time to the worst moments of our lives.





PURGATORY HOUSE

PURGATORY HOUSE		Rel: TBD	HBS User Ratings	
Directed By:	Written By:	Cast:	1 review, 11 ratings ★★★★☆	
Cindy Baer	Celeste Davis	Celeste Davis	Awesome	52.94%
		Jim Hanks	Worth A Look	47.06%
		Devin Witt	Average	0%
Our Reviewer Says:		Johnny Pacar	Pretty Bad	0%
"Teenage Suicide: Don't Do It" - Scott Weinberg (Worth A Look)		Rhiannon Main	Total Crap	0%
		Howard Lockie		

THE EFC REVIEW:

Most depressing tales of angst-ridden teenagers who end up taking their lives end with the miserable demise of said teen. In a sly switch, indie-flick "Purgatory House" BEGINS with the main character's suicide and follows her elucidating visit to the Purgatory House. It's a fairly compelling movie as it stands, but when one realizes that the screenplay was penned by one 14-year-old gal... it adds a whole new perspective to all the angst being tossed around.

Lest you think you're in for something laden with omnipresent gloom 'n doom, Cindy Baer's *Purgatory House* succeeds early and often by approaching its deluge of topical angst with a sly and occasionally loopy sense of humor. Combined with the raw-yet-effective lead performance by the same young lady who penned the script, you're looking at a shot-on-digital film fest-type indie flick that's more challenging and interesting than it is pretentious and boring.

And if you spend a lot of time around film festivals, you can surely appreciate the distinction.

Purgatory House is the story of the recently-demised Silver Strand, a 14-year-old who struggles through those early years that many of us have simply blocked from our memories. Those horribly insecure times, the moments when you're sure that you're the most physically misshapen and emotionally retarded creature on the planet. The age when bullying involves words that hurt a lot more than fists do; when drugs and alcohol and cigarettes and sexuality and all of adulthood's rough edges begin to find purchase in one's mind.

Silver overdoses on pills and ends up in Purgatory House, which is a lot like an eternal halfway house for teens who've opted for suicide. Here she finds a collection of newly-dead malcontents and disgruntled young adults still mad at the world...despite the fact that they're no longer really a part of it. Silver spends much of her time watching the lives of her former friends and family members on "Earth TV" while bemoaning her need for a second chance. The house's authority figures (including God - in drag) offer hints vague at best, so Silver and a newfound potential boyfriend begin to hatch a scheme to earn their second chance at life.

Preachy on only an intermittent basis and perhaps in need of just a bit of pruning here and there, *Purgatory House* consistently belies its earthy (see: cheaply-made) leanings by presenting a story that's both fascinating to absorb and compelling to contemplate. That the screenplay was written by a person firmly entrenched within the purgatory we call puberty lends a rough-edged sincerity that helps one forgive the more static moments.

It's clear that director Cindy Baer and actor/writer Celeste Davis have a host of things to say about the plight of the modern teenager, and it shows a smart sense of instinct that the filmmakers opted to present such a potentially bleak tale with healthy doses of clever (and often arcane) humor. Baer and Davis met as part of the "Big Sisters" program, and their relationship went from that of mentor and friend to director and lead actor. At one point considered an "at-risk teen", Celeste Davis can now look up to see the film she wrote playing at this year's Woodstock Film Festival.

Movies like this one (made inexpensively on digital video, no big stars, no explosions, some artsy stuff on display and a little thinking may be required) are not for everyone, but that's just fine. What I see is a pair of fascinating stories, one in front of the camera and another one behind it.

PURGATORY HOUSE

A film review by Norm Schrager (2004)

It seems obvious that the best way to get deep inside a teen's troubles would be by talking to a teen. So how close can any filmmaker get to a young adult's real issues? Damn close, it would appear, when the screenplay comes directly from the source -- in this case, a 14-year-old writer/actress named Celeste Davis. Producer/director Cindy Baer rests her feature film debut on this inexperienced creative mind, lending *Purgatory House* both plusses and minuses.

There's a lack of polish and, more importantly, an uninhibited demeanor to Davis's script which work well for the subject matter -- a high school girl (played by Davis), after taking her own life, finds herself eternally trapped in a bizarre home with other successful teen suicides. Davis clearly pours her heart and ideals into the narrative, conveying plenty of gravity and complexity (flashbacks, dream sequences, moments of spare dialogue) despite her youthful viewpoint. Baer's biggest accomplishment is in guiding this unapologetic, sometimes awkward voice to the screen.

But allowing Davis such creative freedom is also the film's greatest weakness. Some of *Purgatory House*'s sloppier moments feel like the ramblings of a bright high schooler writing to pass time in detention. Davis's script remains untouched (according to press notes), but the film would've been well served if Baer's direction lifted the parts that needed it, just by tightening up dialogue or adding a smoother touch.

If Celeste Davis needs time and work to blossom into a practiced screenwriter, her acting chops are already on the mark. As Silver Marie Strand, the girl who rethinks her short life and eternal fate, Davis is open, smart and patient, everything that a viewer could ask for in a performance. She plays off her weaker co-stars with ease, and her timing has a confidence that overpowers any rough edges.

Most impressive are the moments of schoolgirl fantasy that Davis unabashedly leaps into. When Silver meets God (Jim Hanks, Tom's younger brother, in drag) on the set of a far-out, loser-goes-to-hell game show, Davis never reveals a second of hesitancy. The idea may seem unrefined, even silly, and the special effects cheap and hokey, but the star offers honest pain and confusion. That's what keeps a viewing audience interested.

Baer's direction does support that same hell-be-damned (no pun) attitude. When a utopian special effects sequence has people of all kinds joining hands, a Tarot card whizzes on and off-screen, like some late-night fortune-telling infomercial. Perhaps small moments like this spew directly from young Davis's overactive brain? In that case, with age, experience and a continued lack of self-consciousness, Celeste Davis will prove to be a true shining talent.



Purgatory's looking better every day.

Scenes from the **A**fterlife

Brockton filmmaker takes us to 'Purgatory' through the Plymouth Independent Film Festival



Celeste Davis and Devin Witt; above, star in "Purgatory House." Below, Cindy Baer of Brockton makes her directorial debut.

By **DRAKE LUCAS**
The Patriot Ledger

The script for "Purgatory House" began with a troubled 13-year-old who had a story to tell.

Celeste Davis had recently moved into a Los Angeles area shelter when she read her story to Cindy Baer, her mentor since she was 11 through the Big Brothers Big Sisters program.

"After she had read about half a page, I stopped her and ran into the other room to get a tape recorder," said Baer, who grew up in Brockton and moved to

Los Angeles at 22 to pursue acting. "(The story) was so innocent and raw, so beautiful."

"Purgatory House," directed by Baer, will be featured at The Plymouth Film Festival, which runs July 22-24.

Baer grew up as an only child living with her mother and she often felt alone. Acting in The Boston's Children Theatre when she was a teenager provided Baer with a positive outlet for her emotion. She hoped that "Purgatory House" would do the same for Davis.

Please see PURGATORY — Page 18



PLYMOUTH INDEPENDENT
FILM FESTIVAL
JULY 22, 23, 24

This is second in a series of stories about the people featured at the Plymouth Independent Film Festival July 22-24. We'll introduce them every Friday in Movies & Music.

Courtesy photos

An Interview with a Screenwriter

Part 1: Getting to know fourteen-year-old screenwriter, Celeste Davis. By: Christie Yao.

"A lot of people believe that when you die, you go to either Heaven or Hell. Purgatory was thought up by the Catholic Church. Some time later, God thought that it was such a brilliant concept that she actually created it. But in a different image. This sure feels like Hell. She no longer watches over us. She doesn't care to see what we're doing or thinking. Our prayers are the only ones unheard, unanswered... We live the same way here as we did back home, except we are dead. And alone."

-- Celeste Davis

Meet Celeste Davis. She is the fourteen-year-old writer of the screenplay, PURGATORY HOUSE. At the age of eleven, Celeste was matched with Cindy Baer through the Big Sister of Los Angeles program. With Cindy's encouragement and help, the full extent of her dream is now being realized. Her story is being made into an independent film. PURGATORY HOUSE is an uncensored look at a teenage girl's life through the eyes of Silver Strand, who lives in a far away place, doomed to watch the lives of her family and friends on a giant television set for all of eternity. PURGATORY HOUSE is a story that mirrors much of Celeste's own life. It's a story about the hardships and consequences of growing up in today's society. It's a story about the sense of belonging and feeling wanted. Recently I had the opportunity to interview Celeste.

Q: Your screenplay is based on a true story, your own life. Without giving away too much of the movie what can you tell us about your life and yourself.

A: My life is complicated, just like other teenagers. A lot of the movie is just the stuff that goes on today in society that really stings kids. Like the fact that no matter where you go in school, there are drugs. And you can tell that everyone puts on a different face for other people. No one is happy, and they try to escape through drugs. All my life I've been around people with addictions and seen the down side of it. In PURGATORY HOUSE we overcome our obstacles even though we have so much to deal with.

Q: Was it difficult to be honest with yourself and objective when writing about something so personal?

A: In the beginning the ideas flowed, and I was uncensored because I never thought that my story would be produced.

Q: Why did you choose to write a screenplay (rather than a short story or novel)?

A: That's just how it came out. It naturally came out of me as dialogue, and that makes a screenplay...

Q: What was the hardest part of writing a screenplay?

A: Finishing it! It's easy to have an idea to write it down. If your' idea is interesting, it's also easy to elaborate on it. But then you realize that even though it's fun that it's also takes lots of discipline. I am lucky that my "Big Sister" pushed me to finish it. It was really hard.

Q: What kind of personal characteristics or skills do successful screenwriters possess?

A: We are not afraid to be blunt. I'm being honest in this movie. That's what gets people to listen. Writers are also very hard thinkers. Nothing passes us that we don't get into deep thought about. It's annoying, but it can also be a blessing.

Q: What are the factors that motivate you to write?

A: I write when I feel lonely or hopeless, singled out, or discouraged. Writing feels therapeutic. I feel real when I am writing. I can say whatever I want to say, and it will be accepted. You have to watch what you say when you talk to someone, but when you are writing you can say anything and be accepted. It's like the camera. They say, "the camera loves you". When you write, the paper loves you.

Q: It's been a long road from the conception of your story to the process of having it made into a movie. What was the greatest obstacle you had to overcome?

A: So far, it's been the way that things are flying at me: unbelievable things. They show up and you never thought that this would happen to you. Though, I think the greatest obstacles are yet to come.

Q: Do you have any advice for all the young aspiring screenwriters out there?

A: This is important. People, even your closest friends, are going to tell you that you are crazy. You may have this fabulous idea for a screenplay and tell them, and expect them to be excited, and they might not be. That doesn't mean that your idea isn't brilliant. Another thing is, if you do know someone who supports you with your project don't take it for granted. Just his or her support will help you so much, especially if no one else seems to believe in you. Once that one person believes in you, more people will. Also, never lie to yourself. If you have an idea and you are afraid that most people won't like it, and will be offended, don't hold back. Be true to yourself.

Q: What are your plans for the future?

A: My plans for the future are to graduate high school, or to try to get into an art school. I would like to go to college for writing, and as crazy as it sounds, I want to work in a coffee house for a couple of years. I want my life to be fun and don't want one job my whole life. I don't want to settle down right away.

Christie, a student, living in Toronto, Canada, enjoys writing short stories and poems, and interviewing famous people.

CINDY BAER WALKS THROUGH PURGATORY

by Eric Campos

Engaged in an acting career for most of her life, Cindy Baer would find herself becoming a filmmaker shortly after joining the Big Sisters of Los Angeles program. Her little sister, Celeste Davis, proved to be quite the talented writer and it was her story, titled *Purgatory House*, that grabbed Cindy's attention. She knew this gripping story about a girl dealing with her own suicide in the afterlife had to be turned into a film. The result is the incredible feature length debut from filmmaker Cindy Baer and writer Celeste Davis. It's an authentic story of teens in trouble, written by someone who knows better – a 14-year-old girl.

We recently spoke with director Cindy Baer about her time spent in *Purgatory House*.

What made you join Big Sisters of Los Angeles?

When I was a kid, there was really no one there for me. When I got older, I decided I would find a little girl who maybe didn't have a mom around, and be the support system for her that I had always wanted and never had. When I joined the program, they told me about this 11-year-old girl who lived with her dad, and liked to write. They thought we'd be a perfect match because I was an actress and Celeste was a writer. Boy, were they right! Becoming a "big sister" is the best thing I've ever done, and I love my little sister!

Did you always want to direct your own movie, or did Celeste's story bring out the hidden director in you?

That's funny. The thought of directing a movie had never before crossed my mind! I was searching for a director, but couldn't find anyone who had the vision of it that I had. Then it dawned on me: if I'm the one with the vision, I guess I should be the one to direct it! The way it all went down was that Celeste was going through a really challenging time, and landed herself at a teen runaway shelter. Hoping to motivate her to go back home, I told her we'd make her script into a 5-minute short that she could star in. But after I typed her latest version of the script into the computer, and read it, I realized that it had to be told in its entirety. It was like nothing I'd ever read before. It blew me away!

What was it about her story that really struck you?

Wow! Where to begin? She had this incredible way of revealing the story! It was deeply philosophical, had strong, well-defined characters, and the subtext was profound. Being the story of what happens to a 14-year-old girl after she's committed suicide and revealed in four timelines, it was introspective and powerful, yet entertaining and amazingly creative. It was enlightening. I felt like after seeing her movie, an audience would walk away with an understanding of what it's like to be in this kid's skin, and the challenges of today's teen in a brand new way. It was mature in some places and childish in others, which, to me, so beautifully captured that "in-between" age that she knew so well. It told a story I'd never heard and presented it in a way that had never been done. And it felt important. I felt like her voice spoke for all of these other kids who didn't know how to say it. This was right after the Columbine shootings, and so suddenly there was a big light on all the teen angst. To me, this felt like the beginning of finding some answers.



"I found that these young actors were very open, and had not yet developed those bad habits that become difficult to overcome..."



"She had the best time and learned so much about filmmaking, and herself..."

How did you assemble your cast?

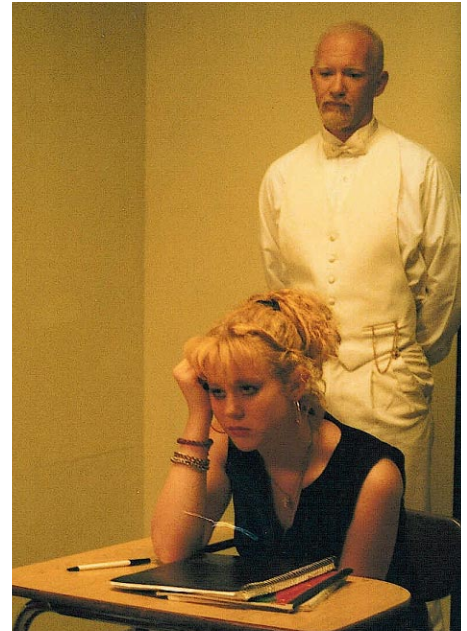
We put ads in the breakdowns and trade papers, and auditioned people for about three months! At first we tried to go non-union, but we couldn't fill the roles. So we got a SAG limited ex agreement and it opened up a whole new world of actors. Before casting began, I already knew that Celeste would play the lead role. Even though she had never acted before, I felt strongly that she should be able to tell her own story (one of the great things about not having to report to a studio!) And she pulled it off great! Devin Witt, (Atticis) and Johnny Pacar (Sam) were both sent in by their agents. Devin actually lives in Kentucky, but was here for the summer! Casting the role of Saint James was the hardest. We had seen hundreds of actors for this role before Jim Hanks finally walked in. And it was only a couple of days before we started shooting! Talk about cutting it close. Whew...

Was it easy working with a young cast?

Once I figured out which tactics worked best for each individual actor, it was quite easy. For instance, Celeste and I are so close, and she's so in touch with her feelings, that all I had to do to get her to cry was start crying myself. Into another actor's ear, I might whisper a simple objective, while someone else would respond best to the focusing on the subtext or sensory recall. I found that these young actors were very open, and had not yet developed those bad habits that become difficult to overcome.

Were there any major problems in getting *Purgatory House* made?

Oh my God! Where do I begin? Everything from optioning a script from a minor, (which was unprecedented and therefore had to be approved by the court), to getting a work permit for Celeste from a school system that doesn't issue them to students with poor grades, to attempted blackmail. Yes, blackmail. The day before we started production, one of my key crewmembers threatened to drop out if I would not give them a role in the film (which I did not). On set, SAG showed up three times during the 18-day shoot, and all three times our studio teacher was nowhere to be found! Our insert stage (that about 1/2 the movie sets were built on) was right under the flight path of the Burbank airport, so we were constantly holding for planes – hundreds of planes! It became a joke. Almost every day was a battle working with limited minor hours to get our shots in the can. So, many fires to put out. But we did it! Hallelujah!



"Casting the role of Saint James was the hardest. We had seen hundreds of actors for this role before Jim Hanks finally walked in..."



"Almost every day was a battle working with limited minor hours to get our shots in the can. So, many fires to put out. But we did it! Hallelujah!"

Do you think this moviemaking experience has helped Celeste with her problems?

It did! She had the best time and learned so much about filmmaking, and herself. Being focused on a creative project got her out of the doom and gloom. Now she looks forward to creating more things, and has a reason to wake up in the morning! It also gave her a confidence that she didn't have before. On the flipside, it's made her much more concerned about her appearance. It's hard for a teenage girl living in a society that's so superficial to not buy into it all. But she'll deal with it. And who knows? I wouldn't be surprised if these new issues get worked out via another insightful screenplay!

Will you continue making films, or will you focus on acting again?

If another project came along that I felt as passionately about, I'd definitely go for it. I've learned so much that the next one would be a whole lot easier! And I think I'm good at it. But my first love has always been and will always be acting. I'll never give that up.



Johnny (Scott Clark), Silver (Celeste Davis) and Sam (Johnny Pacar) in the high school bathroom.

From Purgatory To Cinematic Heaven

A First-time director tells of lessons learned debuting at Woodstock FF

BY CINDY BAER

I'm waiting in line at the **Woodstock Film Festival**, when I overhear a woman talking about a powerful movie she saw the night before. She says she can't stop thinking about it. I'm listening in, trying to figure out which film she's raving about. When I hear her say, **PURGATORY HOUSE**, my jaw drops. It's *mine!*

That moment—which rates as one of the best in my life—was two long years in the making. The journey of directing and producing my first feature was finally finished. At last it was time to get **PURGATORY HOUSE** out into the world.

I found Chris Gore's awesome book *The Ultimate Film Festival Survival Guide*, and read it from cover to cover deciding which festivals **PURGATORY HOUSE** would be right for. Then I called every filmmaker I knew to see if someone could refer me to a festival insider who might give me a bit of advice. This led me to festival-programmer guru, Thomas Ethan Harris, who has championed films as **KISSING JESSICA STEIN** and **THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT**. He agreed to meet with me, and I was on my way. Thomas's advice was invaluable.

I learned there are three primary objectives a filmmaker seeks from playing a festival: **1. Press**, **2. Buyers**, and **3. A good public audience**. These things bring your film validation, which will hopefully lead to distribution! The festivals are broken into three categories: **Community** (which has one of three), **Regional** (which has two), and the **Top-Tier** (has all three). If you have determined (from objective industry people) that your film has the potential to play big, then there is a strategy to consider, as Top Tier festivals are unlikely to program films that played at smaller festivals. When Thomas told me he felt **PURGATORY HOUSE** had a shot at playing big, I was on cloud nine!

3 primary objectives a filmmaker seeks from playing a festival:
1 Press
2 Buyers
3 A good public audience.
 The festivals fall into 3 categories:
Community (which has 1 of the 3),
Regional (which has 2),
and the Top-Tier (has all 3).

I knew that to be taken seriously, we needed dynamite, professional promotional materials. I was lucky to find the talented graphic design team of 3 Dogz Creative (3dogz.com). Together we branded everything from posters to press kits—electronic and printed. The e-kit was the best idea—saving both time and money. The most important piece of

advice I'd give any filmmaker is: know what makes your film different from other films and promote yourself accordingly. How is your film special? For **PURGATORY HOUSE** it was the fact that it was entirely written by a 14-year-old, and offered a point of view that had never been heard before. Because I had listed **PURGATORY HOUSE** in *Variety*, *Hollywood Reporter*, and on Mandy.com, a few festivals invited us to submit with waived fees. Unfortunately this enticed me to make the mistake of submitting before our feature was finished. I was so excited that I jumped the gun. Although festivals will accept unfinished cuts, I don't recommend submitting this way. You've worked so hard; don't let other people have to imagine what your final vision of the film is.

When the **Woodstock Film Festival** invited us to screen, I called Thomas for advice. We agreed that although it was a newer festival, it had really great things going for it. It was near New York City, and programmed by a distributor from Palm Pictures. This meant other distributors and key industry people would likely attend. The feature line-up was select, consisting almost entirely of indie favorites from Top Tier festivals (such as **PIECES OF APRIL** and **SHATTERED GLASS**), and they had a strong audience and press attendance. WFF felt right. So this would be it—our World Premiere!

My priority now was selling out the screenings and publicity. I sent invitations to distributors & press, as well as screeners to reviewers including: Film Threat, Entertainment Insiders and eFilm-critic. WFF's hospitality department was helpful coordinating my rental car, directions, and accommodations. At last, it was time to go to New York.

My week at Woodstock felt like a natural high that I didn't want to end. **PURGATORY HOUSE** had great buzz, and sold out both shows. The response was amazing. It was an incredible feeling to play our piece in front of its first real audiences. WFF started the ball rolling for us, and great things have been happening ever since!



Dave Gouveia (from 3Dogz), Director Cindy Baer and lead actor Jim Hanks at the Bearsville Theatre. Below, the audience anticipates the World Premiere of **PURGATORY HOUSE**.



An expanded version of this story can be found at: www.filmfestivaltoday.com. To learn more about **PURGATORY HOUSE**, go to: www.purgatoryhouse.com.

BACK TO PURGATORY

by Eric Campos (2004-10-14)

It's been almost a year since I first spoke with Cindy Baer about her film Purgatory House, which was written by 14-year-old Celeste Davis. Back then, the film was fairly fresh on the scene and being personally blown away by it, it was my wish that it get out there so as many people as possible could see it. That wish is coming true as "Purgatory House" is still on the festival circuit, wowing audiences all over the country. So I thought this was a good time to catch up a little with Cindy to find out how her year has been in Purgatory.

When we first spoke, you were just starting out on the festival circuit. How's the experience been?

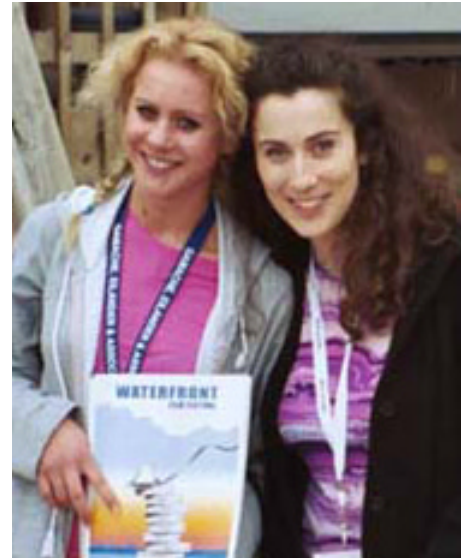
It's been incredible! It's exciting going from city to city, seeing all of these amazing independent movies, and meeting the different filmmakers. And as the tour goes on, you start to run into other filmmakers you've met at earlier festivals. The best part is that it really feels like the movie has a life. And it's so interesting to see how the audiences vary in each place. Every festival is so different, but all of them have a deep respect for the films they are showing, and the work the filmmakers have done. It's been amazing, and I've learned so much.

How has Celeste been handling her newfound fame?

Since she's still attending high school, she's only been to four of the festivals. But she's having a great time! I think her favorite moments were receiving the "Best Screenplay" Award at the San Diego Film Festival (which was an engraved statue), and a "Best Performance in a Feature" Award at the Silverlake Film Festival at the Arlight in Hollywood. I've never seen her look so happy.

How have the audience reactions been to the film? I'm really curious to find out what younger audience members think about it as I'm such an old man.

He he. You're such an old man! The audiences have been great. A big asset of playing the festival circuit is getting to see who our audience really is, instead of who I think it is. Our Q&As after the screenings are always enlightening, and turn into these deeply philosophical discussions from people of all ages. One festival director told me he was surprised to hear people asking questions about the nature of religion instead of the usual questions like "What was your budget?" And as for younger audiences: You know, I was very surprised at how positively they've been reacting to the movie! I thought that the slow pace in the film may not hold the MTV generation's attention. But that's not the case! They are loving it! And they seem inspired by it, which is what I really wanted. I am thrilled.



Cindy and Celeste on the Waterfront...Film Festival that is.



Cindy at the Woodstock Film Festival, man!

Any advice for filmmakers out there who are trying to get their films into festivals?

I recommend having a good plan. My goal was to play at only well-respected festivals, gain momentum and buzz, build a fan base, and nab some great reviews to help validate the film and secure distribution. My advice is to research the festivals you are interested in. (Don't just submit to everything). Make sure it seems like it's a festival you'd be a good match for, and that you would benefit from playing at. Look for festivals that get good audience and industry attendance, and good press coverage. Look to see what movies they've played in past years. Choose your World Premiere wisely, because you only get one. Make it count. Try and find someone well respected in the industry who is willing to champion you. We were lucky to find some great champions very early on, and it definitely opened some doors for us. In competitive festivals, know that not all films are placed into competition categories. Do your best to try and get your film into competition so you can be considered for awards. Have a good website, and build a fan base. And most importantly, don't swallow the bitter pill, and stay away from jaded people. Attitude is everything.

Are there any distribution plans for "Purgatory House"?

We've been approached by several of the mini-majors, and over 25 sales agents. We were already offered DVD/VHS distribution on the spot (by companies I'm not familiar with) at two different festivals. I'm still learning about the process right now, and I don't want to jump the gun and make a wrong choice. There are many balls in the air, and my goal is to have this locked down in the next 2 months. I would really love for this movie to pay for Celeste to go to college. If you want to follow our progress, feel free to visit our recent news link at www.purgatoryhouse.com.

Is Celeste working on anything right now?

She's writing a book right now but I'm not allowed to say anything about it. It's "top secret" you know! She has also started another screenplay that seemed really interesting. Right now her main goal is to finish high school.

What's up next for you?

Getting this movie OUT THERE! I'm very single-minded, which is my biggest asset and biggest liability! I don't know exactly what I'm going to do next. I'm sure there will be another film in my future. I will probably go back to my theater. (I co-founded the Mosaic Theater Company, and it's been on a very long hiatus, since I've been working on "Purgatory House"). I've started writing a book called "Thirty-four" (which is my autobiography in 2 parts. The second installment will be in thirty-four more years if I'm still around). Of one thing I am certain: some creative project will come my way and fill me with passion, and take over my life. It always does.



Cindy and Celeste meet Chris Gore at the San Diego Film Festival and live to tell about it...



"Purgatory House" recently screened at the ArcLight in Los Angeles as an official selection of the Silverlake Film Festival where it won Best First Feature and Best Actress awards.