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arts & entertainment



Mickey Rooney, left, advises Brooklynite Keith Black on "Driving Me Crazy." In background is Dick Cavett.

Equation of persuasion

Math teacher turned filmmaker snags big talent with 'chutzpah'

BY AILEEN JACOBSON
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A Malverne bowling alley had to substitute for one in mid-America, and seaside condos in Long Beach stood in for beachfront California condos. This is largely because Keith Black, the producer, co-author and lead actor of the recently made film "Driving Me Crazy," is afraid to fly.

So is his character, Elliot Brown, a man near 40 who lives with his mother in Brooklyn — just like Black — and pursues a relationship with a woman he met online. That Black *didn't* do, he says, because he couldn't get into a plane and never went by car, as Brown does in the movie.

Black, 38, couldn't board an airplane, even when, he says, he was invited to sit on a panel at the Venice Film Festival with his hero, Woody Allen, the subject of Black's first movie, and even though his mother volunteered to accompany him.

What Black, a math teacher at Sheepshead Bay High School in Brooklyn, can do though is get famous actors to agree to appear in his movies — even though he can offer only the slimmest possibility that many people will actually have a chance to see them.

Casting coups

The cast of "Driving Me Crazy" glistens with Hollywood and TV icons — some you might not have thought about in awhile, but stars just the same. They include Oscar winners Mickey Rooney and Celeste Holm, Oscar nominees and

Emmy winners Joseph Bologna and Renée Taylor, Emmy winner Dick Cavett and Emmy nominee Louise Lasser. He made his movie, he says, with \$50,000 of personal savings, including bar mitzvah gifts and funds he'd planned to use for a wedding with "the future Mrs. Black," whom he has yet to meet. "I'm very, very, very good on the phone. And I have tremendous chutzpah," Black says.

Due largely to his tireless efforts, his 2003 short, "Get the Script to Woody Allen" — which won a Long Island International Film Expo award — got a tremendous amount of press for a \$3,000 production. It played in several other festivals and movie houses, garnering features in major newspapers, including Newsday, The New York Times, Daily News, Boston Globe, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, San Francisco Chronicle and Hollywood Observer.

That background didn't hurt as he called agents and managers this time out, Black says, and neither did the script that he co-authored with an experienced writer, Mark Troy. Steve Marshall directed the film, shot at various locations in the New York area.

"I had a great time. He's talented. It was a good script," Bologna says in a telephone interview. "When you get to a certain age . . . when something comes along where you can be creative, you take it. This is not for money, this is for your muse."

"I thought it might be fun, and it was," says former talk-show host Cavett, speaking from his Montauk home. "It was a day that was all about Mickey Rooney. When he arrived, it was like the Marx Brothers had entered the room. He immediately took over the direction of the picture. . . . He was as energized as he was as Andy Hardy, with about 80 years pasted on."

Cavett plays a Brooklyn pharmacy owner who employs Black's character, while Rooney and his wife, Jan Rooney, play disgruntled customers and Holm plays another customer. Bologna and his wife Taylor (nanny's mother in TV's "The Nanny") appear as Black's estranged parents. Up-and-coming young actresses Maxine Bahns (on whom Black has a crush, he says) and Jeanine Bartel play his long-distance love and her younger sister, who drives cross-country and bonds with him.

"A one-man band"

Louise Lasser, who plays the young women's mother, became particularly fond of Black. "He was a doll," she says by phone from her Manhattan apartment. "He's one of a kind, an original kind of person. He sort of wears himself on the outside. . . . I didn't know what to make of him at first, which I'm sure is the same experience everyone else has. He's so singularly him . . . he can call people up and if he gets turned down, he moves on. . . . What makes him able to do that?" says Lasser, who made her mark with such quirky roles as the 1976-77 "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman," and was once married to Woody Allen. Of Black, she adds, "He's like a one-man band. . . . He's not afraid. He just persists and goes on."

Black, who's now "in the editing and selling part" of his moviemaking, says he hopes his movie will be the next "Little Miss Sunshine" or "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," indie films that became huge successes. He plans to enter it into the Cannes, Venice and 2009 Sundance festivals, he adds. "This is my passion. I'm putting it all on the line."

For more on Black, visit getthescripttowoodyallen.com and myspace.com/drivingmecrazymovie.

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