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Wisconsin Film Festival: 'Tracks' follows issues two teen friends face

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Amanda J. Hull and
Rebecca Rose Phillips
star in the drama
"Tracks," filmed entirely
in Milwaukee, which will
screen at the Wisconsin
Film Festival this Sunday.
- Submitted photo

The drama "Tracks" rings so true about the experiences of teenage girls that a viewer has to assume that the filmmaker either was one, or has spent a lot of time around them.

Neither is true. Josh Rosenberg is a young writer-director who drew largely from his own experiences and imagination in creating "Tracks," the story of a budding friendship between two girls that gets tested by traumas in their lives.

"For me, I never really kind of looked at it as a male-female thing," Rosenberg said in an interview from his home in Chicago. "There are certain aspects of my personality that influenced every character."

The final cut of the film gets its world premiere at the Wisconsin Film Festival at 11:15 a.m. Sunday at Monona Terrace Convention Center. Rosenberg, producers Scott Foley, Kurt Mueller and Niels Mueller, and actress Amanda J. Hull are all scheduled to attend. Some tickets will be available at the door for the screening.

Set in Milwaukee's Shorewood High School, the film looks at two teenage students from so-called "different sides of the tracks." Catherine (Hull) is a shy, withdrawn teenager from a good home who is a little unsure of herself. Claire (Rebecca Rose Phillips) is an older, more experienced girl with a rebellious streak, fueled in part by living with an abusive father.

The film chronicles their growing friendship, and how it becomes strained by issues that many teenage girls face; sex, drugs, abuse. But "Tracks" isn't an Afterschool Special, but rather a realistic, at times almost documentary-style, look at what teenage girls have to grapple with.

Rosenberg graduated from the UW-Milwaukee in 2006, and went to Los Angeles to work as an assistant to Niels Mueller, a Milwaukee native best known for writing and directing the Sean Penn movie "The Assassination of Richard Nixon." While in Los Angeles, he began working on the "Tracks" screenplay, inspired by the strong women in his life that he didn't often see portrayed in television and movies.

"I've always been kind of disappointed by female characters in film," he said. "Women always seem to be the mother, the girlfriend or the whore."

Above all, Rosenberg wanted to portray teenage girl characters who weren't "good girls" or "bad girls," but a realistic mix of both. In the film, Catherine may be the innocent, but undergoes experiences that lead her into some dark places. Claire may be the wild child, but exudes surprising tenderness and empathy for her new friend.

"In all of us, there's great things and there's evil things and sad things," Rosenberg said. "There's so much variation inside any single person, so to put any of us in a box is a dangerous thing to do. There's beautiful things and not so beautiful things about anybody."

Once the screenplay was finished, Mueller encouraged Rosenberg to make the movie himself, so Rosenberg came back to Milwaukee to film it, using a crew of only 12 people and a budget of around \$300,000.

He auditioned about 15 young actresses for the two lead roles, and said the Hull and Phillips ended up having a bond on the set similar to what's portrayed in the film.

One of the most important processes as a director was to develop a sense of trust between himself and the actors, particularly because many of the scenes in the film are so wrenchingly emotional. Before filming even started, Rosenberg and the actors would meet to go over scenes, and began sharing about their own experiences.

"Tracks" is currently available on DVD, and Rosenberg plans to take the film to other festivals after Madison. He said he really enjoyed the experience of filming in Milwaukee, where he found both a large pool of talented cast and crew and a lot of friendly people willing to let him shoot in their homes and schools.

"I just feel like there's so much talent in the state of Wisconsin," he said. "That was one of the biggest things was being able to capture all the acting talent that's in the city. It just made my job as a director so easy to get to work with these actors who were bringing so much to the table."