

The Ultimate Self-Made Media Darling and Author, Diablo Cody

By Paul Bachleitner

The film, "Juno," is the latest indie sensation to seduce critics and inspire end-of-year awards buzz. While the sharp dialogue and quirky protagonist of "Juno" are exceedingly sharp and quirky, even by indie-film standards, the film might be most remarkable for its writer, Diablo Cody.

Although "Juno" is Cody's first screenplay, she is shuttling across the country from Sundance to Letterman's New York studios to promote it. Big-budget Hollywood screenwriters rarely enjoy this level of popularity, let alone a rookie scribe. So, what gives?

Cody couldn't really explain it when I caught up with her in mid-December, literally five minutes after she'd learned the Golden Globe Awards had just nominated her script for best screenplay.

"It's really unbelievable. You know, to have Roger Ebert go see it in Toronto and blog about it that night because he's too excited to wait for his review. I mean, that is crazy."

You'd have to avoid the *New York Times*, *Star Tribune*, *Wired*, *Salon*, and pretty much any other media outlet covering arts or entertainment not to come across a story about Diablo Cody in the last month or two. She is certainly a talented writer, but has quickly become an A-list media darling because of her persona.

Cody used to be a sex performer. She parlayed over a year's worth of hard labor swinging poles in Minneapolis strip clubs into a high-powered blog that helped nab her a column in the *City Pages* and pen a best-selling memoir, *Candy Girl*. The memoir's success leveraged the chance to write "Juno."

She is the ultimate self-made woman. Even her name, Diablo Cody, she created as a spicier, more memorable alternative to her birth name, Brook Joan Busey. The transformation began after moving to Minnesota four short years ago.

"I lived in Chicago for 25 years of my life, didn't write jack," she said. "I move to Minneapolis and my career takes off. And I really feel that this city was a muse to me in some way."

It's hard to say how much of Cody's persona is a conscious creation and how much is inherently her. She grew up in a suburb of Chicago and attended a writing program at the University of Iowa as an undergrad.

"I wanted to be a poet, actually," she said. "To this day I have a fascination with the rhythm of language, just the cadence of language. So, that aspect of studying poetry actually has come in handy."

Her love of poetry comes forth in her screenwriting as a savvy ear for dialogue. But it's a skill she has honed through very conscious cultivation.

"I am the ultimate sort-of eavesdropper," she said. "People are writing their own best dialogue and they don't even realize it."

Cody styled the plot of "Juno" to showcase the snappy, witty exchanges that figure prominently in her other work. A 16-year-old girl, Juno, becomes pregnant by her best friend and decides she'll give the baby to a yuppie couple after she's given birth. Humor develops from the weird relationship dynamics that ensue.

The film seems very autobiographical, and Cody agrees to a large extent, although she's never been pregnant. "I relate to Juno in a lot of ways, although I was never that witty or cool."

The locations also have a strong semblance to reality. The film occurs in Minnesota and references a number of places Cody has and hasn't frequented. She's lived in St. Louis Park and Robbinsdale, although she's never been to St. Cloud, where the film's yuppie couple lives.

How much of Cody's persona is fabricated is impossible to determine, but it's nonetheless intriguing to consider. She claims in a recent interview in *Minneapolis-St. Paul Magazine* that she's an "absolutely terrible actor."

But it's hard to believe her claim. She is livelier and more effervescent than most actors I've interviewed. Her teeth sparkle. She has bright, photogenic eyes and rarely breaks eye contact while speaking. She certainly has the presence of a starlet.

"I never thought I would do the kind of job that made people happy in life because I've always been kind of a little black cloud," she said, beginning to tear up. "It makes me feel like I have a chance to be a good person."

Whether the tears are genuine or not, Diablo Cody has something better going for her: authenticity. She has crafted a persona and a writing talent that are uniquely hers and made them utterly believable by her active will. And this is what's charmed the media into making her their darling, at least for the moment.