



Clark Gregg has one of those faces; you've seen him in countless TV and film roles, usually looking serious and determined and carrying a gun. He's played enough cops, lawyers, and FBI agents among them his recurring role as Agent Michael Casper on "The West Wing" and his appearance as the mysterious operative looking to recruit the title character in "Iron Man" to start his own task force. It's a casting trend that amuses the 46-year-old Gregg and his friends. "I did kind of become the go-to guy for authority figures, which is something that everyone who knows me gets a really good laugh out of," he notes. "I guess I have an FBI face, I don't know."

At any rate, it's one that is becoming increasingly familiar to audiences, thanks to turns in films like the aforementioned "Iron Man" and his regular role as the wry ex-husband to Julia Louis-Dreyfus on the CBS comedy "The New Adventures of Old Christine." But as he's gaining recognition as an actor, Gregg is also building a solid reputation behind the camera. It began with his script for the 2000 film "What Lies Beneath," the creepy ghost story starring Harrison Ford and Michelle Pfeiffer. Not content with conquering two professions, Gregg is now making his directorial debut with "Choke," an adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's twisted novel, starring Sam Rockwell and Anjelica Huston.

Palahniuk's novels tend to be darkly humorous creations that defy definition and are generally regarded as near impossible to adapt. The only one previously transferred was "Fight Club," directed by David Fincher and released in 1999. Describing the plot of "Choke" proves arduous, even for Gregg. "It's what I would call a black romantic comedy," Gregg says. "It's not an easy one to break down." The plot centers around a sex addict named Victor Mancini (Rockwell) who purposely chokes at restaurants in order to be rescued by Good Samaritans he can then emotionally blackmail for money. The goodwill cash keeps his ailing mother (Huston) in a mental institution, where Victor becomes involved with a doctor (Kelly Macdonald) who believes Victor is a clone of Jesus Christ. And never mind his day job as a performer at a colonial village, where he earns the ire of the Lord High Charlie (Gregg, in a hilarious supporting turn). Fortunately, Gregg never had to try to pitch the Byzantine plot. "It was brought to me as a novel to adapt, so I skipped many steps," he says. "I went crazy for it and pulled in every favor and begged and pleaded and threatened in order to make it myself. By the time I had to explain it, it was already a script that was making people uncomfortable."

Though he had appeared in a few high school productions, Gregg says he never thought he would become an actor. "I wanted to be in punk bands or be in trouble," he recalls. He played soccer at Ohio Wesleyan University until he dislocated his thumb, and on a whim he tried out for the school production of "Much Ado About Nothing." He landed the lead but didn't consider pursuing acting as a career, though he admits, "It got under my skin a little." He dropped out of school and moved to New York, and then his friend Mary McCann turned him on to a class being taught at New York University by David Mamet and William H. Macy. "It was there, working with those guys, where I first discovered acting could be something interesting and noble a profession you could give something of yourself to, not just have it be about ego gratification," says Gregg. Gregg graduated from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and, along with Mamet and Macy, was a founding member of Atlantic Theater Company, where he continues to serve on the board of directors. He remained busy on stage, appearing in "A Few Good Men" on Broadway and directing an acclaimed revival of Mamet's "Edmond," while also making trips to Los Angeles for film and TV work.

When a friend suggested he try directing for film, Gregg was intrigued. "I said, 'I'd love to, but how do you do that?'" he recalls. "They said, 'The best thing you can do is write a script.' So I started to write for that purpose: to create something I could glue myself to so adhesively that someone would put up with letting me direct it." He admits he had always been interested in writing but had been too intimidated. "The writers I knew and worked with in New York David Mamet and Craig Lucas and people like that I was so blown away by what they accomplished as playwrights and screenwriters that I found the whole concept terrifying." But at this point, he was living full time in L.A. and found that the alienation of a new life helped urge him on: "If I hadn't had that quiet boredom, I don't think I would have sat down and started writing."

One of the first pieces he wrote was a cabaret evening called "The Big Empty" "that was all about how bitter I was in L.A.," he says with a laugh. "We did it at a bar, and it cost \$10 to see, but people laughed a little, and it made me go back and write something else. I just kept chopping away. I knew I couldn't just sit there." His acting agent soon began representing him as a writer and sent out a supernatural-themed script Gregg had completed. "DreamWorks didn't want to make my movie, but they had a ghost-story idea, and they were interested in having me try to write that," he says, still sounding surprised. "So I got hired to write a movie." Gregg calls his experience on "What Lies Beneath" "a two-and-a-half-year film school" and praises director Robert Zemeckis for "keeping me around and involved."

He also noticed that when one career began to flourish, the other followed suit: "The funny thing is, as soon as I started working as a writer, suddenly I started to get a lot more paying work. Before, I'd been doing a lot of theatre or guest-star roles, and you can't stay alive too long doing that." He had notable turns in Mamet's "State and Main" and Nicole Holofcener's "Lovely & Amazing," and was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award in 2000 for his work in "The Adventures of Sebastian Cole," while continuing to field writing assignments. "Then I was sent 'Choke,'" he recalls. "And I remembered why I started writing to begin with: so that I could make a movie. And I said, 'Maybe this is the one.'"

Gregg was instantly drawn to the offbeat story and thought the fact that Palahniuk wrote in such a filmic way would make adapting it easier. He was wrong. "The only conversation I had with Chuck, he said, 'I'm just going to give you one hint: Don't be too faithful to the book.' I thought, 'That was nice, but he had to say that,'" Gregg recalls. "I told myself, 'There is so much funny, visually fascinating stuff in here; I'm just going to kind of do a cut-and-paste and turn it into a screenplay.' Then I spent a year and a half struggling." It was only after he decided to lose the first-person narrator and throw the book in the drawer that the screenplay began to take shape. "Some of the things that were most interesting in the book didn't land quite the same way as a movie script. I think that's pretty common," he says. "You have to turn it into its new self."

Once he had a script in place, Gregg knew he had to find the perfect leading man to win the audience over. "This script was something that made people uncomfortable, and Victor does a lot of sketchy, sleazy things," he notes. "It was clear I needed someone who wasn't a lothario type and you could really care about." He had met Rockwell when they performed together in 1991 in the play "Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love." "It was this deranged-serial-killer play where everybody was naked most of the time," Gregg says with a laugh. "It was kind of experimental, and everyone would have to stand frozen upstage while everyone else did their scenes. I realized after about a week or two that I was racing through my murders just to get back to my

freeze position so that I could watch Sam." Rockwell clicked with the "Choke" script immediately. Says the actor, "Clark did a great job capturing that very specific and unusual Chuck Palahniuk tone, which is kind of like Ken Kesey meets John Irving."

With Rockwell on board, Gregg found that other actors became interested. "I don't know if Anjelica would have taken the script seriously without Sam," he confesses. "A lot of actors are big Sam Rockwell fans, and she was one of them. I think she agreed to meet with me based on that, and we hit it off." Gregg shot "Choke" in 25 days in July 2007 while on hiatus from "The New Adventures of Old Christine." Having worked with a variety of directors, from Bryan Singer to Robert Benton, Gregg knew what he looked for in a filmmaker. "The old saw everybody says is to have somebody who knows what they want. And that's a big part, for them to have a clear idea of the story they're trying to tell," he says. "But the ones who are clear enough about what they want to achieve that they are very open about how they get there those to me are the people I don't want to leave at the end of the day."

He also had mixed feelings about directing himself while playing colonial re-enactor the Lord High Charlie. "In one way, it's nice. The odds are very slim the director is going to say anything too mean to me," he says with a laugh. "But about seven days in, I was just beginning to get the crew to pay attention to me, and suddenly I'm ordering everybody around in a frilly shirt and knickers. Any semblance of authority I had evaporated quickly."

The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January, earning a Special Jury Prize for best work by an ensemble cast. The win capped a long journey for the hyphenate who never intended to even become an actor. "I do sometimes have people come up to me and ask about how to plan a career like mine, and I want to laugh," he admits. "Because for years I felt like I was always on the brink of being finished. But one of the things I learned from being in a theatre company was to always be working. Don't get rusty; always be doing something." He also remembers knowing he would be in for a struggle from the beginning. "You hear these depressing lectures when you start out: 'Of the 50 of you in this room, 48 will be dead by morning!' And maybe some people aren't meant to be doing it, but if you really love it and keep plugging away, I feel like everyone gets a shot."

And though Gregg admits he isn't sure how the rest of the world will react to "the demented comedy about the sex addict" when the film goes into limited release on Sept. 26, he has plenty of other projects to distract him. He recently began work on the fourth season of Old Christine and is starting to write an ensemble piece to direct. "That is, if they'll let me after this one comes out," he notes. "This next one may be as twisted as 'Choke.' And I don't have Chuck Palahniuk to blame this on."

Outtakes

Film credits include "The Human Stain," "Spartan," "We Were Soldiers," and "Magnolia". Married since 2001 to actor Jennifer Grey; his father-in-law, Oscar winner Joel Grey, appears in "Choke" as a sex addict. Says Gregg, "Everybody was really excited he was there. He did me a bigger favor than he'll ever know, because it lent me some credibility right off the bat."

Doesn't know if his character will return for the "Iron Man" sequel: "I certainly hope so. I've been given reason to think so, but I've been at this too long; I'll believe it when I see a script."