



# Edge

# River's

By Michael Giltz

Consider these names: Crispin Glover, Keanu Reeves and Ione Skye Leitch. They're not the usual names you see flashing across a movie screen. But then *River's Edge* — the film all these people are involved in — is not your usual movie. Director Tim Hunter is well aware of this.

"I have to admit," he said, "when I first saw the credits I laughed at how unusual so many of the names were. It was definitely a bunch of people you weren't used to seeing on marqueees."

But with the critical and commercial success of *River's Edge*, those names are popping up more and more frequently. The movie launching these people is a stark,

darkly funny film that — like *Blue Velvet* — leaves no one unmoved.

It is a fresh, realistic portrayal of teen-agers so drugged out they are desensitized to all but the most extreme emotions. *River's Edge*, is sharp, painful and frequently hilarious.

And it is the type of movie for which critics drag out the Big Adjectives, adjectives like "controversial, compelling and shocking." Movie-mavens Siskel and Ebert are not alone in naming *River's Edge* "one of the best films of the year."

The story they are raving about is related to a real incident that occurred in northern California in 1981. A teen-age boy took his girlfriend into the hills and

strangled her. Later he returned to school and bragged about what he'd done.

When no one believed him, the murderer took groups of his classmates into the hills to view the dead body of their friend. More and more people found out about the killing, but it wasn't until several days later that someone on the fringes of the group reported it to the authorities.

But as Tim Hunter explained in a telephone interview, that incident was merely a springboard for the imagination of screenwriter Neil Jimenez.

"Neil only read a contemporary news story on the murder, something everyone read," Hunter said. "He did not research the crime. He took what he had read about it and filtered it through some of his own experiences and brought a lot of inspiration to it. So it isn't based in any detailed way (on the actual event)."

The end result is something much more satisfying than any docu-drama could hope to be. When Samson (Daniel Roebuck) kills his girlfriend, Jamie, their buddies seem more confused about how they feel than what they should do — which is nothing.

"I cried when that guy died in *Brian's Song*," a girl says glumly at one point. "You'd figure I'd at least be able to cry for someone I hung around with."

Telling dialogue such as that is what first attracted Hunter to this project.

"The screenplay was very well-observed and very dispassionate. And yet I had a great deal of feeling for the characters. *River's Edge* is dark, but it has a heart. I was (sympathetic) anyway toward the people in it. Some people see these kids as monsters; my feelings toward them are more complex," he said.

Ironically, Hunter's feelings toward even the *idea* of doing another teen-oriented picture were complex. He first came to prominence with *Tex*, which

made a star out of Matt Dillon and turned Hunter into a hot property. He bided his time and finally chose *Sylvester* as his second directorial effort.

A girl-and-her-horse movie, *Sylvester* is notable for being the motion-picture debut of Melissa Gilbert and little else. "I had an excellent time making *Sylvester*, I really enjoyed it . . . although it was a disaster commercially," Hunter said.

Hollywood is only too eager to put people into immutable slots, and he was determined not to be tagged a teen director, a la John Hughes. But when Hunter came across the script to *River's Edge*, "It knocked me out . . . it felt so realistic, and it's a damn good story."

That realism is tempered by a surreal sense of humor. Much of that comic relief is provided by Feck, a local recluse played by Dennis Hopper. He is a burnt-out refugee of the '60s who hands out Feck-weed (marijuana) to the local kids that gravitate around him. When alone, Feck dances around his house with a blow-up sex doll, which represents the girl he murdered many years ago.

"I killed a girl once," he says proudly. "No accident. Put a gun to the back of her head and blew her brains out the front. I was in love."

"Dennis was great," Hunter says. "The kids idolized him. He brings so much wonderful history with him. He and I were really in great agreement about different approaches to the part, and we just had a really good time working together."

Another actor Hunter enjoyed working with was Crispin Glover, who plays Layne, the nominal leader of the teen-agers who is constantly wired on speed. Glover played Marty McFly, Michael J. Fox's father in *Back To The Future*. Coming hot on the heels of that smash success, Glover's presence gave *River's Edge* an extra push.

Ironically, any criticism of the film has centered on his performance. While the rest of the actors are disarmingly believable, Glover is hyperkinetic and distraught. In many ways, he embodies the film's balance between the off-beat and the off-putting.

Hunter spoke up for him: "I was very happy to have everybody low-key and natural, and Crispin off on his own plane. He did see the part in comic terms very specifically, and he built a very strongly stylized, physical performance."

Another very stylized moment gives the film what may very well be its most striking sequence. In the scene, the killer describes to Feck how he killed his girlfriend. That vivid monologue is interweaved with shots of two other characters making love, and the result is a creepy, unnerving passage that few in the audience can forget.

Often, such highlights of a film are "discovered" in the cutting room or improvised by the director, but Hunter spoke up proudly for the screenplay.

He said, "That scene was absolutely scripted that way — cut for cut. Actually, when Hemdale (an independent film company) agreed to make *River's Edge*, they were a bit nervous about that scene. But I felt it was strong and had a classical, timeless feel to it."

While the film is careful not to make moral pronouncements, Feck and a radical teacher at the local high school — both symbols of the '60s — do represent a conscience of sorts. But Hunter does not feel it is making any comparisons between then and now.

"I don't think *River's Edge* is saying, 'Maybe the '60s were better,'" he said firmly. "But how I interpreted the script — which had all those linkages between the '60s and the '80s — was that whatever values people got excited about in the '60s didn't travel very well."