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Turning on and tuning in

Anton Yelchin (l.) is a self-styled therapist and drug-dispenser who irks his principal (Robert Downey Jr.) in "Charlie Bartlett."



Before launching into the new 'Star Trek,' Anton Yelchin raises teen spirits in 'Charlie Bartlett' BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Let's just say that clever, precocious rebellion isn't too much of a stretch for young actor Anton Yelchin. In his new movie, "Charlie Bartlett," opening Friday, Yelchin plays an upper-crust loner with a zonked-out but loving mom (Hope Davis) who's forced to attend public school but soon wins over everyone à la Ferris Bueller with his nonchalant cool and a steady supply of prescription drugs.

In real life, when he was 4, the Russian-born Yelchin reportedly said "nyet" to his famous skating-star parents: He preferred the stage to the ice rink.

That led to a breakout role at age 10 in "Hearts in Atlantis," opposite Anthony Hopkins; loads of guest-star roles on everything from "ER" to a lead role on the cable show "Huff"; David Duchovny's directorial debut, "House of D"; and the plum part of navigator Pavel Chekov in J.J. Abrams' now-filming "Star Trek" movie reboot, opening May 2009. (For non-Trekkies, Chekov was the Starship Enterprise's youthful helmsman with the Davy Jones 'do, played in the 1966-'68 series by Walter Koenig.)

But although Yelchin graduated from high school last summer and has a burgeoning movie career, he can still get passionate about the negative vibes of a factory-like public school system that doesn't encourage creativity. Call it residual buzz from "Bartlett."

"High school is such an unhealthy environment," says Yelchin, who turns 19 in March. "Teenagers are like atoms when they're moving at hundreds of miles an hour and bouncing off each other. Everybody's got such a crazy hormonal drive and reacting to each other differently and getting upset over little things. High school puts all these potential explosions in one place."

Yelchin couldn't understand why anyone would care if he was wandering hallways when the class he was skipping was a waste of time. "Look, I'm watching 'Mulan' in government class," he'd tell a hall monitor at his school in Sherman Oaks, Calif., expecting them to agree he was better off outside. (Nothing against the Disney movie, he says, but "Network" or "M*A*S*H" or "Apocalypse Now" would've been better choices.)

So it may seem the confident, rule-breaking Charlie — a guy who charms his school's principal (Robert Downey Jr.) while losing his virginity to the principal's daughter (Kat Dennings) and launching a successful business providing therapy and drugs to the students — would be a breeze for Yelchin. Not so.

"Charlie's really an extraordinary person," says Yelchin about the character. "He has a kind of optimism I could never understand. Actually, working on the film helped me on confidence in general just from the simple physical perspective of not slouching. My impression is that confident people don't slouch."

Yelchin spent his own high school graduation in a friend's rehearsal studio jamming to classic Rolling Stones songs. But what would Charlie have done?

"He'd have a party for the people who couldn't go to the cool party," says Yelchin confidently. ♦

teenage dreams
Anton Yelchin's free-thinking Charlie Bartlett is cinema's latest crafty kid. See more at
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