

'DOG' DAY AFTERNOON

A pooch lover seeks solace in
Mike White's film **BY MICHAEL GILTZ**

In the offbeat comedy "Year of the Dog," opening Friday, aggressively upbeat secretary Peggy (Molly Shannon) is thrown into a tailspin by the death of the love of her life — her beloved dog Pencil. People don't really take it seriously. They're polite, but after a few days of feeling down, shouldn't she be ready to get back to work?

But writer-director Mike White wants to treat Peggy's pain — and the fact she devotes her life to animals — seriously.

"It's fun having characters that are often the butt of the joke being front-and-center," says White, 36, who wrote and starred in the similarly off-center indie "Chuck & Buck," as well as writing for the cult TV show "Freaks and Geeks" and the films "Orange County," "The Good Girl," "School of Rock" and "Nacho Libre."

"Their problems and their frustrations [often] aren't taken seriously. But also women — there are so many funny comediennes, and they're always given short shrift. It's fun to use whatever mojo you have to try and give somebody else a chance, and try to make something for people who aren't always [appreciated] in movies, particularly comedies."

But using that mojo also means putting yourself out there more. White says that "Dog," his first directing gig, was a lot more fun than he expected, thanks to actors like John C. Reilly, Laura Dern and Shannon, a "Saturday Night Live" vet who White worked with on his own short-lived series, "Cracking Up." But eventually, he says he got tired of being the decider.

"At some points, I felt like I could not make *one* more decision," says White. "Literally: 'I do not care whether she's wearing the flower print skirt or the plaid skirt.' But, no, I'm the director. It should be all about wanting to make sure the prints on the skirt are *exactly* what my vision is. But sometimes I just couldn't pretend that I gave a flip."



HUNG UP Molly Shannon plays a perky pet lover whose beloved canine dies.

While he owns two dogs and two cats, White says he's not an animal-rights fanatic. The movie, after all, isn't about joining PETA so much as taking seriously the people who find their passion in something other than the typical, proscribed paths. And the carnivore film crew — "[They've] gotta have ribs at least once a week," laughs White — kept things from getting sentimental. But even they were swayed by a scene at an animal shelter, where Peggy suddenly insists on adopting every dog scheduled to be put to sleep.

"That was actually a working shelter," says White, "and there were in fact many dogs that got adopted that day by 'hard-headed' crew members." ♦