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From the Los Angeles Times

L.A. FILM FESTIVAL

'E.R.' star resurrects late punk rocker Darby Crash

Actor Shane West says it was a huge challenge summoning the mad passion needed for the film role.

By Fred Schruers

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The fast, furious and enigmatic career of late-'70s punk rocker Darby Crash, who died of a heroin overdose Dec. 7, 1980, at the age of 22, remains a half-buried L.A. legend. His demise was overshadowed by another rock death the next day — the shooting of John Lennon 3,000 miles east.

As explored by debuting director Rodger Grossman in "What We Do Is Secret" — screening at 10 p.m. Saturday at the Mann Festival as an entrant in the Los Angeles Film Festival's Narrative Competition — Crash's strutting and fretting hour on rock's stage, portrayed by actor Shane West of "E.R." fame, is given a renewed chance to claim its place in pop culture.

The film revolves around an empathetic performance from West, 29, who is self-deprecating almost to a fault when he says playing Crash is "a losing battle in general. I'm not ignorant enough to say that I could duplicate Darby's madness, intelligence and wit. But I became close with his family and friends, and that was the validation for me."

West so thoroughly channeled Crash that after a rigorous series of rehearsals to get actors playing, as music coordinator Howard Paar paraphrases — "as good as the Germs were when the Germs were bad," West was recruited as lead singer to go on the road with the reformulated band.

"Some of my reviews in the beginning were a little harsh," admits West, "because I felt I needed to put on a tough-guy front to deal with the crowd [he in fact had a bottle-throwing exchange with a Manhattan audience], but now, though I try to channel some of his energy, it's definitely Shane. Or as [drummer] Don Bolles christened me, 'Shane Wreck.'"

The Germs are booked to perform at 4:30 p.m. Saturday on the Festival Promenade on Broxton in Westwood.

"When I met Shane, he hadn't done 'E.R.' yet," Grossman recalls. "I'm embarrassed to admit, I didn't know who he was, hadn't seen [the teen romance opposite Mandy Moore] 'A Walk to Remember.' I still had my sights set on a lot of different names, but I looked at him and saw Darby. And he took me outside and just said, 'Look, you know, I'm your guy.'"

West would ultimately back up this claim by undergoing three separate rounds of installing and scraping off a dental prosthetic and by volunteering a cash grant to the filmmakers to finish off the film. How much? "Well, let's say — a Ferrari [worth]. And uh, a small car." He now laughs that he did the film "for food and gas" and would be perfectly content — when the film finds a distributor, as seems likely — to break even.

Grossman describes stretching the budget to cover 21 shooting days done in three chunks from 2005 to early this year as a process in which "we made nickels scream. We not only ate the whole chicken, we chewed on the bones and then made broth and drank that."

No one's more aware of the irony of the film's title (from a Germs song of that title that crowed, "Hidden deep in the furor / What we do is secret — secret!") than Grossman. The writer-director has struggled for 15 years to bring the project to fruition. Grossman says he was a fan of the L.A.-based band and decided to make a film about the group's tragic implosion well before he learned that Crash's death allegedly was the dark fulfillment of a pact the singer made — with himself and his generally unbelieving band mates and camp followers — to bring the curtain down permanently after five years onstage.

"This script was rewritten more times than probably any script I know of," Grossman says, "because what Darby did was so shrouded in secrecy that his character and story revealed itself very slowly. It was very late in the process that I had even heard that he had a five-year plan to make his mark and then commit suicide, thereby ensuring his legend."

It was around 1995 that Grossman, while working on various indie productions, wrote his Darby Crash script. He ultimately teamed with seasoned music coordinator Paar, who had first come to America in 1978 as "an English punk kid who found that the Germs were the one band who were authentic."

Producer Stephen Nemeth of Rhino Records' film operation, had met with Paar and director Larry Clark on the prospect of Clark directing Grossman's script in one of the film's many false starts. That collaboration was shelved, and Grossman continued his voyage of discovery with author/impresario Brendan Mullen, the Scotsman who ran legendary underground club the Masque (and, via a series of interviews Grossman often collaborated on, compiled the definitive oral history "Lexicon Devil: The Fast Times and Short Life of Darby Crash and the Germs").

Though Grossman and Mullen would part company when they differed over the project's direction, Grossman had by then enlisted Pat Smear, born George Ruthenberg and Darby's best pal as they went through a highly unusual schooling at the Innovative Program School in West Los Angeles'

University High. Smear would enlist the cooperation of the defunct group's bassist Lorna Doom, who'd been in virtual hiding since the death, and drummer, Don Bolles.

A second, crucial ally was Michelle Baer Ghaffari, who had been one of Crash's best friends. She would earn a co-writing credit on the script and act as a co-producer and, Grossman adds, "had oversight of everything you see in the film as far as hairstyles and makeup and wardrobe. It was absolutely critical to me that the look of this film be authentic — theirs was an aesthetic-based culture, so if that was wrong, what would be the point of making the film?"

The final key element came when Paar, who along with Smear and Grossman wrote a letter to David Bowie, convinced the English rock icon to license his epochal "Five Years" and "Rock and Roll Suicide" to the production.

The film steadily dramatizes Crash's quest — an artistically committed if benighted one that Grossman calls "a tragedy" — without slipping into Spinal Tap absurdities. (And this despite the band's infamous "drummer thing," an ever-mutating position that was occupied at one point by Go-Go-to-be Belinda Carlisle and at another by Crash's lover, Rob Henley, who becomes a sort of disruptive Yoko figure in the piece.)

Without digging too deeply into the controversial touchstones Crash (born Jan Paul Beahm) intellectually flirted with — they included Hitler, Nietzsche, Charles Manson and L. Ron Hubbard — Grossman makes good dramatic and comic use of them. Thus we see Crash replying to a bandmate who asks, "Who would your ideal fascist leader be?" with a casual, "Me ... but just in my little circle of friends."

West agrees with Grossman that the film tells "a cautionary tale," but doesn't see it distilling to a moral lesson. "Maybe everyone around him could have listened more. But I think he would have done everything he said he was going to do anyway."

Perhaps in making the film Grossman has brought some redemption to what, on the face of it, is a sordid episode even amid rock's often grim history.

"Hitler used to have his architects make two models of the same building," Crash tells a friend in one revealing moment in the film, "one to see what it would look like when it was built, the other after it was destroyed."

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