



ARTS

THE MUSE

A noted actor writes and directs his first film—starring someone else.

DEPENDING ON YOUR PATIENCE FOR NEW YORK films boasting heady scripts, rich urbanites, and psychiatrists, 2007's film adaptation of Daniel Menaker's novel *The Treatment* was: (a) either worthwhile for Ian Holm's portrayal of the last great Freudian, or (b) just another indie you passed up for the latest big-budget studio flick. Mostly, however, it was a chance to see gifted actor Chris Eigeman in his most mature performance to date as an emotionally crippled English teacher in psychoanalysis.

You know Eigeman even if you can't place the name. The 43-year-old Denver native entered the cool periphery of cultural consciousness in the 1990s, with lead roles in films by cult auteurs Whit Stillman (*Metropolitan*) and Noah Baumbach (*Kicking and Screaming*), for whom he delivered memorable turns playing sarcastic bons vivants. But *The Treatment* wasn't just a chance for Eigeman to knock out of the park a whole new type of role. It was a career turning point. It led him to meet his friend and collaborator, dazzling actress Famke Janssen, for whom he then went on to write and direct his first film—a bold, high-stakes picture called *Turn the River*, due out this summer.

Featuring a nearly doc-style visual sense and brooding original score, *Turn the River* won awards for best screenwriter and actress at the Hamptons International Film Festival. It allows Janssen, formerly known for her roles in the *X-Men* movies and in the TV show *Nip/Tuck*, to let loose as virtuoso pool hustler Kailey Sullivan, a tough woman trying to win enough money to kidnap her abused son from his father—she's a proto-feminist player putting everything on the line.

"After *The Treatment*, I quickly realized I was writing for Famke," Eigeman said one recent day in his New York office. "She has a distinctly gritty beauty. When you're around her every day, there's this no-nonsense, almost cowboy spirit."

Shot in the low light of an old Brooklyn pool room, *River* could only have emerged from an observant filmmaker who's worked under some of the



Clockwise from bottom: Director Chris Eigeman; setting up a tricky pool-table shot for *Turn the River*; on set with Janssen and Jaymie Dorman.

most interesting of his generation's directors—even if this film skews more beautifully spare than those of his mentors. It also fairly breathes billiards experience from an insider who knows how to build—and film—unusually dramatic pool table shots.

"When I first moved to NY, I played a lot of pool," Eigeman says. "*The Color of Money* had just come out. Everybody was playing nine-ball, and I ended up losing a lot. I still play but not for money. But that was also a time in New York when a lot of stuff was changing. New upscale joints were coming in. You could take girls and have dates. A lot of the great old rooms disappeared."

But the film isn't just a chance to resurrect pool-as-bloodsport; it's a bona fide vehicle for Janssen, if an unlikely one. "It's all in the script, but Chris's writing is minimal—not full of flowery language," Janssen says. "And it really helps when you work with smart directors who have been actors."

Characteristically self-deprecating, Eigeman is only onscreen as a one-second cameo in the film. "I don't know how people write, direct, and star in their own film," he says. "Many do it really well. But I think that on our small budget—\$500,000—it could look like a vanity project. Also, I didn't want it to fail because of my bad acting."

Right. But if *River* proves anything, it's that Eigeman doesn't just know how to act. "Screenwriting is just dialogue and action, and if you square that out, you're in good shape," he observes. "There's a great quote from Edith Wharton—dialogue should be 'regarded as the spray into which the great wave of narrative breaks.' I like it mostly because it gives the sense that the more dialogue you can successfully pull away, hopefully the wave is strong enough to support its absence. It's a very cinematic notion—it encourages you to start in the middle of things. It's better for actors. They aren't burdened with horrible exposition. They can start right in on the meat." —ADAM BAER