

A slice of 'Pie'

WHEN 'AMERICAN PIE' COMES TO THEATERS THIS FRIDAY, MANY ACROSS THE NATION, ESPECIALLY THOSE IN MICHIGAN, ARE WAITING TO SEE HOW THE MOVIE, WHOSE SCREENPLAY WAS WRITTEN BY UNIVERSITY GRAD ADAM HERZ, FLOATS THIS SUMMER.

'U' alum takes Hollywood by storm

By Erin Podolsky
Daily Arts Writer

LOS ANGELES — The latest member of Hollywood's million dollar club — not to be confused with the mile high club — is none other than University graduate and native Michigander Adam Herz. Herz, 26, is jumping into the limelight with his first produced screenplay, "American Pie." Made by Universal, it's about to hit the big screen in a big way, and rumor has it that the sound it makes will be a big splash, not a big thud.

Herz and I recently enjoyed some nebulously low-grade falafel and had a chat about a day in the life of a working Hollywood scribe. "I'll get up about 9 a.m., write until 1 p.m., take lunch, and the afternoon is usually spent on the phone schmoozing with my agents and managers," Herz said. "That's a typical day when I'm in 'writer mode.'" He laughed. "When I'm blocked or I sort of have time off, I completely fuck around."

During production, Herz spent some time around the "American Pie" set.

"(Directors) the Weitz brothers and I became pretty good friends pretty fast; just sort of spoke the same language. Every step of the way they kept me

involved." He also had some input in the pre-production process in an unofficial capacity. During casting, Herz said, "they would send me videotapes of their favorites, 'What do you think?' They asked for and I gave them all my high school yearbooks. They wanted to see what kids looked like, how they dressed, who were your friends, you know, things like that."

The comfort level around the set made Herz okay with not spending every waking moment there. "It was very cool that it was, in a way, my movie and it was fun to be around, but at the same time it's an hour of setup and then five minutes of filming. I could be at home writing rather than sitting on the set," he said. "Luckily (the directors) got it, so I was very comfortable staying half-involved."

There were, of course, the times when Herz single-handedly saved the production from imminent disaster. "One day I showed ... and all the cars had their Michigan license plates. Half the cars had these purple plates, and I was just like, 'What the hell is that?'"

The prop guys, Herz said, told him that they were the "other kinds of plates in Michigan," at which point he had to step in and correct their grievous error. "Turns

out that the prop house they had gotten them from somehow got confused and gave them some old Michigan truck plates from the seventies." Herz's super-heroics went unrewarded, though. "Not a single license plate ended up in the movie," he sighed.

To describe "American Pie" as being frank about teens and sex would be an understatement. Rated R, the film was submitted to the MPAA ratings board four times before it shed the dreaded NC-17 label. "They had objections to the opening scene," Herz said. "They said what you hear on the scrambled cable is pornographic. Originally it was 'Play with my hairy balls,' and now it's okay because it's 'Spank my hairy ass.'" Herz smiles wryly. "They didn't like 'blow your wad on my tits,' and that was just left. I don't know why."

The MPAA, which approves not only films, but their theatrical trailers, TV and radio ads as well, is a thorn in the side of any filmmaker, and Herz is no exception. "Hollywood is terrified of the MPAA and the ratings board. It's like the Mafia," he said.

"Our TV ads can't do things that you see on the shows in between the ads. I think it's a system that needs to be drasti-

cally overhauled. They don't want to be called the censorship board but they know they are."

Herz used his own experiences to formulate some prime advice for University students. "My one hope for the (University) film program is that they teach students to recognize filmmaking as a business and as a way of life, as a way to make a living and that they prepare students for that."

After "American Pie," Herz has several projects lined up, including, he hopes, a shot at directing. He's doing a reworking of "Smokey and the Bandit" called "Eastbound and Down." "I'm doing a TV show, too," he said.

"I'll probably write a spec script and attach myself as a director. Also, and this is heavily knocking on wood, but if 'American Pie' does well, I'll write and direct the sequel."

Judging from audience response at preview screenings of "American Pie," writing and directing the sequel is pretty much a sure shot for Herz.

"When I was at Michigan, Hollywood was some 'other,' an impenetrable fortress and anything commercial wasn't good. That's a bunch of malarkey."

American Pie
Universal Pictures
At Briarwood and Showcase
★★★

In my unscientific estimation (hours spent in the wilds of suburbia with my teenage brother and his hooligan buddies), the average middle class male aged 14-24 thinks about sex four times a minute. Naturally, the average male also discusses sex — six times a minute.

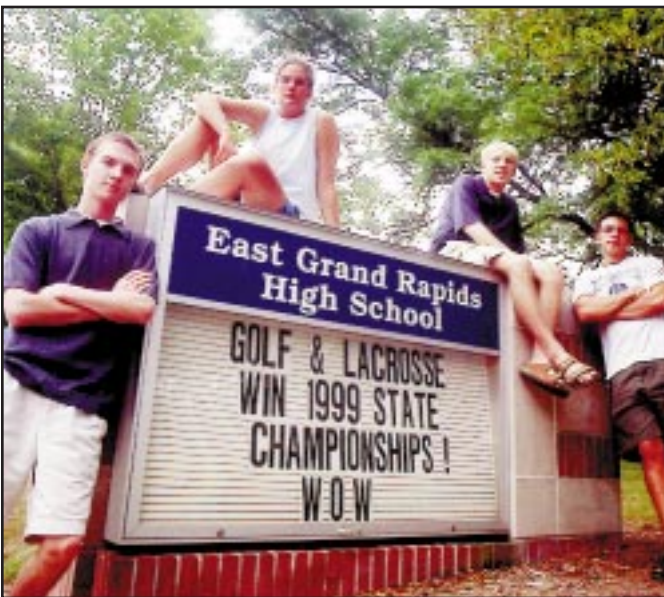
"American Pie" takes my hypothesis and turns it into the basis of a great teen sex comedy. Notorious East Great Falls High virgins Jim (Jason Biggs), Kevin (Thomas Ian Nicholas), Oz (Chris Klein) and Finch (Eddie Kaye Thomas) make a pact to graduate high school deflowered. The catch? It can't be by hook or by crook, so to speak.

Whether our heroes get some or get none by the end of the movie is better left unspoiled. But there's more than just ribald ribbing to recommend "American Pie." University alum Adam Herz's screenplay devotes plenty of time to a faction often neglected by this genre: the chicks. Mena Suvari, Tara Reid, Shannon Elizabeth, Alyson Hannigan and Natasha Lyonne give the film a rare smart perspective and nicely balance the heartfelt camaraderie that underlies the boys' crotchfelt agreement.

"American Pie" moves from one set piece to another, each time marking new territory in just how funny a teen's quest for sex can be. Most of its players are up to the task, and standout Biggs more than makes up for any inequities brought in by Nicholas and Reid. Likewise, Herz's strong — and at times hilarious — script more than makes up for Paul Weitz's (with an uncredited assist from brother Chris) pedestrian, after school special-esque direction, elevating this to raunchy, if not high, art.

Erin Podolsky

Writer's hometown awaits release, controversy of 'Pie'



DANA LINNANE/Daily

Recent East Grand Rapids graduates (from left) Jimmy Sterns, Lisa Bruwer and incoming LSA first-year students Brent Traidman and Adam Siegel are among the many in Herz's hometown who are anxiously anticipating the release of 'Pie.'

By Ed Sholinsky
Daily Arts Editor

EAST GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. — With mounting pressure from Washington on Hollywood, movie theater owners have vowed to make R-rated movies inaccessible to persons under 17. This is particularly poignant for "American Pie," which opens Friday. It's amongst the new wave of teen films aimed at younger audiences but that carry an R rating.

Nevertheless, in East Grand Rapids, the home of "American Pie" screenwriter Adam Herz, a group of recent East Grand Rapids High School graduates said that the sexual content of the film isn't a big deal.

"(Sex) is everywhere, but you can't really discuss it very well (in East Grand Rapids)," said East grad Jimmy Sterns, an incoming first-year student at Western Michigan University. "But everyone still does it anyway ... especially the religious ones ... more than anyone else."

This reaction is largely in response to the uproar that news of Herz selling the "American Pie" screenplay caused in conser-

vative West Michigan. The film deals with the exploits of four students from the fictional East Great Falls High School who make a pact to lose their virginity before they graduate.

After the school's student newspaper, The East Vision, and The Grand Rapids Press reported the \$750,000 sale of the screenplay in January 1998, The Press received letters of complaint about the raunchy subject matter of the film.

Even Sheila Pantlind, assistant principal at East, who proclaims that she will always support Herz's work, complained that "teenage movies have gone to the extreme," trying to be "a little more gross than the other."

Still, Pantlind called Herz "a comic genius," and said that "the school community is proud of him."

But the reason the reaction is so strong in East Grand Rapids is that rumors spread around the community that the movie is

actually a fictitious version of the ritzy suburb and its high school. Herz contends that his fictional East Great Falls is meant to represent the typical Midwestern teenage experience.

In "American Pie" students look not only to get laid but to also party and get drunk.

The film highlights two parties — one in East Great Falls and the other after the prom in a cottage on Lake Michigan — both of which contain sex and excessive drinking. Sterns and fellow East grad Brent Traidman, an incoming LSA first-year student, said they agreed that that is an accurate representation of teen life in East.

Students are "always looking for a place to get drunk," Sterns said.

Traidman said that the after-prom parties at cottages on Lake Michigan aren't unusual for East students. He added that "there's chaperones, but the chaperones don't care" about the underage drinking.

And the protests that Sterns, Traidman and incoming LSA first-year student Adam

See REACTION, Page 14

