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Reviews **Movies**



BUELLER? BUELLER? A COLLEGE COURSE ON JOHN HUGHES

Students at L.A.'s USC film school can now get credit for analyzing the work of the '80s teen-angst maestro.

By Anthony Breznican

The guy who made an entire movie about the joys of skipping school is now part of the curriculum. This semester, the University of Southern California in Los Angeles began offering "The Genius of John Hughes," a course devoted to the late auteur of

'80s teen life, with a syllabus focused on coming-of-age classics like *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *Sixteen Candles*. An instant hit with students—enrollment topped out at 98—the class became a sort of pop culture archaeology experiment,

excavating long-hidden secrets about some of Hughes' most beloved movies.

On the February evening we attended class, no less a Hughes authority than the filmmaker's inspiration herself, Molly Ringwald, did the excavating, showing up as a guest lecturer. "John was really easy to talk to," she told an audience of rapt students. "There weren't many adults I really connected with. He was kind of a big kid." With a nervous laugh, she added, "I don't know if I would have gotten along with him as an adult."

So how did the Hughes oeuvre land a spot at USC's film school, renowned as one of the best in the country? The

department's screenwriting chair, Jack Epps Jr. (he co-wrote *Top Gun*), proposed it last year, and professor Don Bohlinger ran with it. "Everyone recognizes that he made a bunch of really great films and defined an era," says Bohlinger. "You go to any dinner party and mention John Hughes, people will go, 'Wow, I remember...'" The filmmaker's sudden death from a heart attack at age 59 in 2009 certainly put him in the public consciousness again. And persuading USC film school dean Elizabeth M. Daley to approve the class proved to be a cinch. "You wouldn't pick just anyone [to build a course around], but with someone like John Hughes—they have ripple effects," she says. "They influenced and changed what came after."

While the bulk of the course focused on analyzing Hughes' most popular films (as well as exploring how he became more introverted, abandoning Hollywood in the '90s to raise his two sons in his native Illinois), Bohlinger did make room for less revered titles like *Weird Science*. Even minor works, after all, have great stories behind them: When the director's producer Michelle Manning (*Sixteen Candles*) spoke to students early in the term, she revealed that the horny-geek comedy from 1985 was not Hughes' favorite, either. "They were editing [*The Breakfast Club*] and John was off shooting *Weird Science* for Joel Silver, and he said to her, 'I'm off doing this silly thing and I want to be there,'" Bohlinger recalls. "The movie's cute and has some funny moments, but there are a lot of loose ends. In a way, *Weird Science* informed *Ferris [Bueller's Day Off]*. Maybe he realized he couldn't just do jokes."

And that, Bohlinger says, is the lesson he hopes budding filmmakers have taken away from his class: Don't be afraid of sadness, sincerity, or pain—especially in comedies. "There's a beating heart in his films," the

professor explains. "There's always a moment where his film stops and deals with real emotion. It's not just about making you laugh. You really feel something." The assignments reflected this course objective: Essay topics included "Fathers in John Hughes" and "Women in John Hughes," with options to turn in short stories or scripts inspired by some of the discussions of the films.

Speaking about her former collaborator, even decades later, stirred up

emotions for Ringwald. After class, the actress acknowledged how strange it was to see part of her life presented as history. "I have to say, unequivocally, yes, it is," she said, biting her lip before breaking into a laugh. As for how the notoriously private Hughes might have felt about being canonized in the classroom, a place his characters zealously avoided, Ringwald said, "I don't think he would be horrified. He'd be surprised. And very pleased."

WHAT WE LEARNED

Here are four lessons Molly Ringwald taught us in class. —AB

1 Aragorn Is a Passionate Smoocher

Michael Schoeffling got the role of heartthrob Jake Ryan in 1984's *Sixteen Candles*, but the runner-up was a young Viggo Mortensen. During his audition, he kissed Ringwald a little too intensely for Hughes, who was fiercely protective of his teenage muse. Ringwald fought in vain to keep Mortensen. "Yeah, I lost on that one," she laughed. "Viggo made me weak in the knees, absolutely."



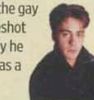
2 The Bully Got Bullied Right Back

While shooting 1985's *The Breakfast Club*, Hughes clashed with Judd Nelson, who mimicked his combative, troublemaking alter ego off camera by teasing Ringwald. "He was just being very Method-actory," Ringwald explained. "Part of that character was needing me constantly. It didn't bother me, but it bothered John a lot." Hughes finally exploded when Nelson made a Stevie Wonder joke (Ringwald's father is blind). He threatened to fire Nelson if he didn't back off. His replacement if he hadn't: John Cusack.



3 Downey as Duckie?

Ringwald urged Hughes to cast Robert Downey Jr. as Duckie in 1986's *Pretty in Pink*. Jon Cryer got the part, of course, but no one bought the original ending, which had her character falling for Duckie. "To me, he seemed like the gay best friend who doesn't know he's gay yet," Ringwald said. They reshot the ending so that Ringwald reunited with Andrew McCarthy—only he had shaved his head and had to sport unsightly headgear. "That was a really bad wig," Ringwald noted.



4 A Beautiful Partnership Had a Sad Ending

When Ringwald turned down some of Hughes' post-*Pretty in Pink* projects to work with other filmmakers, it created a rift. "John was one of the most sensitive people I've ever known," she said. "When you're that sensitive, you are wounded very easily. He was wounded, really, by us growing up. If he'd had his way, he would have kept making movie after movie with me and [Anthony Michael Hall], and nothing would ever have changed."



MORE ON EW.COM For more on the Hughes course, including how Ringwald's mother changed a shocking line in the *Sixteen Candles* script, go to ew.com/johnhughes101