



# UNDERTOW

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# UNDERTOW

*Undertow* is a new, uniquely American dramatic thriller from director David Gordon Green starring Jamie Bell, Josh Lucas, Dermot Mulroney, and newcomer Devon Alan. The film is a rough-and-tumble departure for Green, whose first two movies, *George Washington* and *All the Real Girls*, drew worldwide acclaim for their quiet, lyrical sensibility. With *Undertow*, Green marries action, dirt, sweat, and drama as he spins a tale of the violent legacy between two generations of brothers.

Dermot Mulroney plays John Munn, a hardworking father raising two sons, Chris (Jamie Bell) and Tim (Devon Alan), without their mother. John, a hog farmer and taxidermist, keeps his family in an isolated farmhouse in the woods. Chris, the older boy, feels restricted: his father relies on him to do much of the work (Chris' younger brother Tim is sickly), but Chris knows there's a world outside the family he's yearning to explore.

As the film opens, Chris is throwing rocks at a pretty girl's window. The rocks he throws are too big, he throws them too hard, and next thing he knows he's running for his life, pursued by an angry father with two guns and a mean dog. Though Chris can run fast, he steps on a long, rusty nail that goes clean through his foot; he gets caught and ends up in jail. His father comes to bail him out, and we learn it's not the first time. Before going to bed, John takes in some old time religion on TV.

Soon thereafter the family is confronted by the unexpected arrival of John's brother, Deel (Josh Lucas), just out of jail. Full of charm, swagger, and driving a hot car, Deel is looking to settle an old score. Deel exudes danger, but his brother can't see it; instead, John offers Deel

room and board in exchange for helping out with the boys and the chores. Chris senses Deel is trouble, but he also finds his uncle's fearsome power seductive.

In a flash of violence, Deel's lust for revenge boils over and shatters the family: John is murdered. The boys barely escape with their lives and a sack of gold coins, family heirlooms their father inherited from his father. Deel is wounded but still strong, determined to find his nephews who've run off with the treasure he claims as his own. In flight, the boys navigate the countryside and are free to discover new adventures, but they also encounter new dangers. Because Deel is hot on their trail, the boys must seek food and shelter with the utmost care.

In a new city, Chris and Tim discover a hidden pocket of kids who, like them, are alone and living together on the fringes of society. In this new world, Chris meets a young woman named Violet, and they establish a bond. But before long, the brothers' violent legacy catches up with them. Violet protects Tim while Chris lures Deel into the ultimate confrontation.

United Artists and ContentFilm present Jamie Bell, Josh Lucas, Devon Alan, Shiri Appleby, and Dermot Mulroney in *Undertow*. Directed by David Gordon Green from a screenplay by Joe Conway and David Gordon Green and story by Lingard Jervey, *Undertow* was produced by Lisa Muskat (her third collaboration with Green), Terrence Malick, and Edward R. Pressman. John Schmidt, Alessandro Camon, and Saar Klein served as executive producers, with Sophia Lin as line producer. The talented roster of filmmakers includes Christof Gebert on production sound, the music of Philip Glass, director of photography Tim Orr, editors Zene Baker and Steven Gonzales, production designer Richard Wright, and costume designer Jill Newell.

## **ABOUT THE PRODUCTION**

*"It's more of a get-him-by-the-gut-and-slit-his-throat kind of movie."*  
-- David Gordon Green

Since shooting began on *Undertow* in and around Savannah, Georgia, in the spring of 2003, David Gordon Green has described his film as a "true-crime thriller" and "a dramatic adventure about kids growing up in the swampland." His stylistic approach, he has said, was drawn from boys' adventure novels of the 1950s.

Early one morning on location in the tiny town of Guyton as *Undertow* was nearing completion, Green said that the film “is ultimately about what your family means to you, and about forgiveness and redemption and revenge. It’s about how the things you wish you did and the things you wish you didn’t do start to add up in physical, life-changing ways.”

*Undertow* has several things in common with Green’s previous films, *George Washington* and *All the Real Girls*, such as naturalistic performances by young, talented actors. Green’s films also share extraordinary photography by his collaborator and friend Tim Orr; a certain pureness and authenticity of location and the sound recorded there; and a narrative that reveals a greater emotional truth.

But unlike Green’s earlier films, *Undertow* is a thriller, complete with action, adrenaline and violence. In his films, Green evokes genre and then puts his own spin on established formats with an eye towards capturing a truth and reality not typically found in those genres. In *George Washington* it was the “coming-of-age” story he used as inspiration, and *All the Real Girls* was an attempt to fashion an honest-as-possible portrait of young romance. Now with *Undertow*, Green set out to make a thriller.

“I’m interested in everything, and I want to do a diversity of projects,” says Green. “I’ve done a quiet drama and I’ve done a romantic movie and I wanted to do this, more of a get-him-by-the-gut-and-slit-his-throat kind of movie. At the same time, the story is still based in reality, still based on relationships. It’s still an emotionally driven drama. A lot of the situations are situations I can relate to.”

Also like Green’s early work, *Undertow* is set in an American South untouched by time. Green, who is in his late twenties and a true native of the South, finds it “unfortunate and annoying” that movies often use caricature to depict the South and its people. “The South is just someplace that people don’t really get right,” he says. “In terms of locations or feelings, there’s so much that goes unnoticed. There are so many corners that are unexposed and people and voices that haven’t been heard in movies.” Green wants to depict the South with an honest, true voice.

For seventeen-year-old British actor Jamie Bell, who drew acclaim and a number of awards for his debut film *Billy Elliot* (including a BAFTA for Best Actor), one of the great challenges in making *Undertow* was capturing that Southern voice.

“The Southern accent is death,” Jamie said on the set one morning, right before he shot a scene in which his father (Dermot Mulroney) bails him out of jail. “When David came to me and said ‘You’ve got to do an accent,’ I didn’t think about it at all. I’d always been told that if a director asks if you can do something – ride a horse, swim – you say ‘Yes! Of course! I was born in the saddle! I have webbed feet! I’m the best!’”

“I love a challenge, but I didn’t know getting the accent would be this hard,” Bell continues, shaking his head.

He describes sitting in a room in Savannah before production began and reading the script aloud over and over with a dialogue coach. “It was so intense,” he says, “but people around me had faith in me and supported me.”

Green says, “The trick was to try to get Jamie to use the accent out of character, which made him cranky. I think the most valuable research was just getting him to hang around, talking with real people.

“Jamie Bell is a feisty, sexy Brit,” Green continues. “He’s what most kids wish they were when they’re seventeen. It was necessary for whoever played Chris to have a spirit, a sense of hope, and a sense of confidence, because he really becomes a father figure halfway through the movie.”

Like in *Billy Elliot* and later in *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Undertow* placed major physical demands on Bell, as well as on his co-stars.

Bell, in particular, had to run a lot: his character is the type of kid who finds trouble. In the film’s opening scenes, Chris outruns an irate father until he jumps from a roof and impales his foot on a rusty nail sticking through a board. Having a board nailed to his foot doesn’t stop Chris – it just slows him down – but he can only get so far, and the police catch up with him. Later as he limps away from the police station, he still carries the board, and later that night he fashions it into a toy airplane and gives it to his little brother, Tim, as a birthday present.

The opening scene foreshadows the pain and pursuit to come; indeed, the entire second half of *Undertow* is one long chase through the swamps and hamlets of the deep South. But the scene also reflects a true-life incident: many days before shooting the opening sequence, Bell’s foot had a different encounter with a very long, rusty nail...only this time it was for real.

In recalling the accident, producer Lisa Muskat says it was “disastrous.” “Jamie had been told the location was a hazard and he was only to move when instructed and only to walk where

either David or I set a path,” she says. “But not one minute into it – slice – a nail went straight through his perfect little ballet-softened foot, just like a hot knife through butter.” Bell couldn’t walk for days, much less run, and his character still had lots of running to do.

There were other injuries. Dermot Mulroney and Josh Lucas cracked each other’s ribs during the hot, dusty filming of their climactic fight scene.

Lucas laughs, “You know, Dermot accidentally choked me to the point I passed out once. Dermot broke his rib. He fully accidentally punched me, and I fully accidentally popped him hard once as well. But we had a conversation very early that it was a horrific, very serious, emotional event between these two brothers and what psychologically is underneath it to make it become so violent. We just marked out spots on the floor to hit for the camera, then it was like, ‘Let’s go for it.’

“That’s what you risk if you’re lucky enough to work with an actor who is free enough and open enough to allow that to happen. Both of us simply went for it as hard as we could.”

It was that realistic, guerrilla aspect of David Gordon Green’s filmmaking that attracted Lucas to the role. “I’d heard a lot about David,” Lucas says, “and about his eclectic style of directing and filmmaking, how he uses this incredible realism in his locations and everything. Automatically I was attracted to it for that reason.

“Then I sat down and read the script,” he continues, “and I was terrified. I thought, ‘I don’t know how to play this character.’ He was completely out of my realm of pain and rage, all the things Deel is consumed by. It’s such a dark, gothic, powerful story that I was instantly uncomfortable with it. And I instantly knew I had to do it. I like to do the thing I’m most scared of.”

Lucas found every aspect of the atmosphere on set conducive to living in his character’s world while making the film. “It was physically a very difficult film to make. There’s nothing that was comfortable, which gives it a realism. You’re not going back to a cushy hotel every night, you’re not sitting in a beautiful trailer between takes. You’re grubby and dirty and sweaty and hot, and it instantly helps your performance.”

Lucas describes his character, Deel, as filled with rage. “He’s so filled with hatred and a need to survive at any cost, even at the sake of killing young children,” he says. “But I actually felt not only a great pain inside of him, but a great compassion for him as well. My character is completely lost.

“There’s this bad luck blood that this family has,” he continues. “Deel was dealt such a large dose of it that he’s willing to kill his own lineage, everyone around him, in order to sort of free the family.”

When asked about the title of the film, Lucas says, “Undertow is like the gravity of life that you’re incapable of escaping. No matter what, there’s an undertow, there’s something forcing you or pulling you back into wherever it is you come from – the poverty, the hatred, the rage, and all the things that fill the story.” But it’s the good things in the film juxtaposed against those negative aspects that give the film such powerful hope. “The humanity of the movie is that these children are searching for an escape from their family, they’re yearning for a better existence.”

Muskat says Lucas’s deep commitment to his role was an asset to the production. “Josh set the tone on set,” she says. “His attitude was, ‘I am in this all the way.’ Working with kids, it’s very important to have someone who’s going to be a role model, someone who will take risks and get in very deep. In addition to delivering a harrowing performance, Josh came to be that person for us.”

Of his co-star, Jamie Bell says, “Josh is a crazy guy; he’s a bit insane. He’s not afraid to get hit, not afraid to get scarred. During the making of this film I threw a chair at his head, pushed him under a table, pushed him out a window, and kicked him in the balls. And he’s like, ‘Keep it coming, keep it coming.’”

“He’s got this sly, mysterious, slithery presence,” Bell continues. “Deel is a great part for Josh. The character is a freaky, nasty kind of person.”

Jamie Bell also felt very lucky to have Dermot Mulroney as one of his co-stars: Mulroney is one of Bell’s heroes.

“My favorite film is *Living in Oblivion*,” Bell says. “Dermot is the nicest guy you’ll meet, ever. The character he plays in *Undertow* is a stern guy who finds it hard to communicate. He can’t make eye contact. But the way Dermot plays it, you also feel sorry for him. He has a great scene, wearing his dressing gown, eating birthday cake in front of the TV.”

Dermot Mulroney relished the chance to take on the persona of such a complicated character. Of John Munn, father to the two boys in the film, Mulroney says, “He’s a guy who’s trying to make his way, but he’s got a lot of pain and loss he’s been through. He’s not really well informed about how life ought to be. He doesn’t know how to express his love or anger,

and you see what effect that has on his kids.” It’s the arrival of Deel (John’s brother) that causes things to really go bad. “They have a lot of skeletons in their closet, and it really disturbs him, though he tried to make do and move ahead with his life. But that only works for a certain amount of time.”

No matter how different John’s existence may seem, Mulroneu feels audiences will be able to see a bit of themselves in his character. “There was a lot I could relate to,” he says. “Feeling confused about how to parent. Wondering whether you’re making the right decisions. I think that’s something a lot of people can relate to. John at least gets points for trying.”

Mulroneu has great praise for his experience working with Green and his team. “It’s been fantastic,” he says. “He’s really creative, and he co-wrote the script so he’s got really close contact with the material. He’s helpful and challenging – he’s wonderful.

“David really brings to it this human element,” Mulroneu continues. “There’s a mood he creates and a world that’s just slightly askew from the world we know. It’s really a fresh, wonderful way to make a movie, and you see it on the screen. That’s why people stop and take a look at his films.”

The crew had great praise for Mulroneu as well. In speaking about him, producer Muskat says, “Like his character, Dermot was the moral center for the crew and the younger actors. Everyone looked up to him.” Including the youngest star of the film, Devon Alan, who plays Chris’s brother, Tim.

“Devon was our youngest actor,” says Muskat. “He seemed to find a new family in us, which is an aspect of our productions we try to embrace. He is natural in front of the camera, and he gave us a signature performance with his chigger monologue. As a director, David pushes for that kind of realism, especially for kids to speak their own truth.”

Young Alan describes his experience on the film as a lot of fun. “David is a very cool guy,” he says. “It was my first time working with him, and I had a great time. He has good ideas and he really listened to me. If I thought something wasn’t good in the story, he’d listen and might even change it if he agreed.”

Alan also enjoyed working with his co-stars. “Jamie and I were good friends,” he says. “We just hung out. Dermot is really, really cool, too. He’s very nice, and he’s a good dad, if he were to be my dad. And Josh, he plays my uncle. In the movie he’s evil but in real life he’s really a good guy.”

And did having such accomplished co-stars make Alan nervous at all? “Just because a person is famous doesn’t make them more special than anybody else in the world,” he says. “I treat people who are well-known just like people.”

Of Bell and Alan’s characters, director Green says, “The lives of these two young brothers are a reflection of their father and uncle. Their past is sort of a mystery. There are some horrific elements woven into their story, and it leads them to some violent, gruesome, and frightening places. To see these fears and realities through the eyes of kids is something I wanted to talk to young actors about and see who was interested in trying to feel these things and let me film them. To bring a youthful perspective is a cool part of the process.”

Adds Bell, “We kind of see how the world is weird through the eyes of a sixteen-year-old boy. I was seeing things I’ve never seen.”

*“The best part of working with David is to admire  
how he works with actors to aspire to the very best performance  
they are able to give at that time, in that place.”*

-- producer Lisa Muskat

Green explains the way he works with actors like this: “I just try to find people who are interesting in one way or another, find their strengths, then throw them curveballs while the cameras are rolling. I don’t like people to play from their expectations of themselves and start relating their performances to movies they’ve seen before.

“With *Undertow*,” he continues, “there are many narrative devices we’re dodging, and we’re trying to use performance to dodge them, using the actors’ abilities to get things across without exposition and bullshit.

“If it’s reading one way, you want to try a new way,” Green says. “If it’s reading dramatic, you try it funny; if it’s reading funny you try it with a tear in the eye. I always like to mix it up a bit and see what comes out.”

Green tends to avoid extended rehearsals and eschews blocking (pre-planning the actors’ movements), before shooting. Says Bell, “David likes to go into stuff with an open mind. What’s important to him is that everyone is in touch with their characters; that we understand where they’ve been and where they’re going, mentally as well as on the page.

“David likes to drift from the page,” adds Bell. “He keeps it calm and keeps an open mind. He’s more concerned with character development than with anything else.”

*“This movie is going to have as many zooms as possible.  
The zoom lens has been so underutilized in the past 25 years of American cinema  
and I can’t figure out why, because it was done so well in the ‘70s.”*  
-- David Gordon Green

“This is the kind of movie you want to jump into and sweat through,” says Green. “It gets kind of ugly sometimes, but it’s all to the benefit of the movie. You use the stress and circumstances as an emotional outlet for the technicians in front of the camera and behind it. You try to take it someplace you haven’t been before.” Not only is there stress in the story and its themes, but the sheer task of making a film is full of stressful days and situations.

As Green puts it, “On *Undertow* we were dealing with stunt coordinators and throwing people out of windows and breaking down doors and slitting throats and letting some blood that I’d never let before, so there was a new technical process.”

Through all the hard work, however, Green inspires a cast and crew to feel somewhat like family; through teamwork and a true affection for their craft and creation, Green’s films are put together with a lot of grit, determination, and love.

“Shooting feels like an addiction,” Muskat says. “You can only stop long enough to think through properly to get exactly what you need. We have a great time, work extremely hard, and take pride in what we do.”

Green in particular is proud of the fact that every crew member on set has a voice that gets heard. “On *Undertow*, everyone involved felt free to express their ideas,” he says. “We have amazing camera and art departments that are totally inventive and always conjuring new approaches. Whenever we’re faced with a situation that could play sort of traditionally, we all come up with ways to put a spin on it and make it something you haven’t seen before.”

For instance, Green and cinematographer Tim Orr had a pre-production meeting with a vendor who would be supplying the film with its lens packages. “We asked for specific lightweight zooms,” says Green, “and they said, ‘That’s not the ideal zoom lens – you’re not going to want that unless you’re going to go handheld and zoom at the same time.’ There was this awkward silence, and Tim was like, ‘That’s exactly what we’re going to do.’”

“We also got ‘crash cameras’ because we were going to be throwing them out windows and strapping them onto boards and throwing them out of trees,” Green continues. “There’s certainly more movement and energy in the shots than anything I’ve done before, but it’s all rooted in the characters.”

Josh Lucas has great admiration for the way Green and his filmmakers work together. “You have a group of people who have worked together for three movies now,” he says. “They are all absolutely on the same wavelength creatively and who work 20 hours a day if need be to make David’s exact vision because they believe in him so much and because he’s so wonderful to work with and because he’s so generous and collaborative with everyone around him.”

*“When it comes right down to it, we’re out here,  
just a bunch of guys kicking around in the swamp.  
Why shouldn’t that be the best time of your life?”*

-- David Gordon Green

Green, Muskat, Orr, and many of the key department heads and key crew members on *Undertow*, such as production designer Richard Wright, sound mixer Christof Gebert, post-production supervisor David Cook, editors Zene Baker and Steven Gonzales, and still photographer Karey Williams, have worked together since *George Washington* and before.

“Richard is right in line with David’s natural production design style, with a bit of magic in the dirt of it all,” says Muskat. “Gebert and David can go on for hours about nothing, and then come up with the most amazing ideas. David Cook shepherds our films through the harrowing post production process. We trust these people implicitly.”

Because of their familiarity with each other, Green says, “We kind of read each other’s minds. It’s really helpful and time saving – you can have a really good time then get down to business and not have to joke around with false communications and misinterpretations. So many things get in the way of the fun of making movies. When it comes right down to it, we’re out here, just a bunch of guys kicking around in the swamp. Why shouldn’t that be the best time of your life? If you’re with your buddies, you’re with people who aren’t burdened by insecurity and mistrust. Nobody is breathing down your neck and everyone is open to ideas.”

Muskat says, “I met David and all of our key creatives while teaching at the North Carolina School for the Arts. I was not much older than most of them and shared the same taste

in music and film. I ended up going from being their teacher to being a student of theirs, learning about production and the way they intended to make films.

“Back in school, Tim Orr and I became very close, and I was very happy to see him collaborate with David. I loved *Biography of Barrels*, one of David’s short films. When I saw the dailies of *George Washington*, I had no idea how the story would turn out, but it looked amazing.”

*George Washington* played to great acclaim at numerous film festivals, found a distributor, and opened in theatres around the country, establishing Green and his team as filmmakers to watch. The film came to the attention of veteran producer Edward R. Pressman through his attorney, Jim Janowitz, whose son Will had attended North Carolina School of the Arts and had a small role in the film.

*George Washington* reminded Pressman of the work of his close friend Terrence Malick, with whom he’d collaborated in the past, and with whom Pressman had recently formed a production company called Sunflower.

*Undertow* was developed by Sunflower and Austin schoolteacher Joe Conway. David Gordon Green began his collaboration on the project when he stayed with Conway while working on the Texas release of *George Washington*.

While Sunflower productions developed *Undertow*, Pressman and John Schmidt formed a new company, ContentFilm, with a mandate to finance and produce a slate of low-budget films. As such actors as Jamie Bell became attached, *Undertow* became ripe for a green light, and ContentFilm stepped in to finance the movie.

“*There aren’t enough happy surprises in movies.*”  
-- David Gordon Green

Watching Green work, an observer gets the impression that what happens in front of the camera has been carefully planned: Green is decisive, and his team moves from shot to shot with lightning speed. But according to Muskat, “David lets the location, the weather, the natural light and the mood of the actors and the tone of their performance dictate the day.

She adds, “David has a penchant for kids and animals, so that is always a treat.”

Green also has a penchant for natural, unusual, and sometimes wild locations. The main location for the first half of the film – the Munn family home, complete with working (and authentic smelling) hog-pit – is a two-story Civil War-era farmhouse in the countryside about 45 minutes outside of Savannah. The location had no running water.

Another location, which served as the home of the married couple where the Munn boys first seek refuge, was a virtual menagerie. Recalls Muskat, “There were peacocks, guinea pigs, dogs, a cat, ducks, geese, a 400-pound hog ready for eating, goats and a llama. It was a real mess for Christof Gebert, our sound mixer, a purist at heart.

“Despite our sound tragedies on that day,” continues Muskat, “there is thankfully very little ADR in the final version of the film. Production sound is something that makes a David Gordon Green film feel so real. You can have the most moving scene, stunning camera work, or ridiculous humor, and so often it all comes together because of the rich, natural sound from the location.”

Producer Edward R. Pressman had for some time been trying to get legendary composer Philip Glass to score one of his films, and Glass, in turn, had wanted to work with David Gordon Green. Glass loved the script for *Undertow*, and Muskat brought the composer to the set so Glass could get an idea of how Green worked.

Muskat says, “The days Philip Glass joined us we worked in the thick of the swamps and on a beach on the very day a bounty of biting sand gnats were born. Everyone got dirty. Bugs got up our noses and under our clothes.”

After production wrapped, Glass and Green quickly got down to business. A longtime fan of the composer’s work (the temp score Green borrowed to assemble *George Washington* was Glass’s music), Green also wanted to honor his continuing relationship with composers Michael Linnen and David Wingo, who scored *George Washington* and *All the Real Girls*.

“David asked Philip if he would mind if Linnen and Wingo handled some of the additional music, and he assured Philip it would meld perfectly together,” says Muskat. “We are all very thankful that Glass graciously agreed. David has a keen sense of sound, so working with an accomplished composer such as Glass (as well as renowned *Traffic* mixer, Larry Blake), they created a soundscape and score I think is magical.”

Despite the many financial, diplomatic, and logistical challenges of filmmaking, Muskat believes Green’s creative team relishes working with one another.

“One day you look around and your crew and the actors are standing right in there with Philip Glass and Terrence Malick. David is explaining to Philip the ‘youth choir sound’ he thinks would work perfectly for the scene. Philip suggests we mix the youth choir with a Digeridoo. The environment is ever evolving.”

For his part, Green says, “When I go to the movies there’s so much I’m sick of seeing. It seems like around every corner there’s just another expensive display of mediocrity. Why not at least try to find a place so you’ll have something to look at for a while, and have something distinctive in the character and the narrative? Then you’re fine; any way you go is up.

“It works for me.”