

HEATHERS FOREVER

PRODUCER DENISE DI NOVI ON THE FILM THAT LAUNCHED HER CAREER.

WRITTEN BY LISA Y. GARIBAY



Shannen Doherty, Lisanne Falk, Kim Walker and Winona Ryder on the set of *Heathers*.

PHOTO BY NEW WORLD PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES

Denise Di Novi's first full producing credit came in collaboration with a first-time director (Michael Lehmann) and first-time screenwriter (Dan Waters). The 1988 film *Heathers* blew up expectations of what a teen flick should be, leaving a wake of rabid adolescent fans and shocked—if not flat-out disgusted—adults. While not initially a box office or critical success, *Heathers* has since cemented its legacy as a pop culture milestone, cherished for its violent yet hilarious take on just how damn hard it is to be a teenager.

"Aside from John Hughes, teen movies were kind of a wasteland," says Di Novi. "It felt like we were doing something important, things that define my career in a lot of instances. It was a writer with a very unique voice and a director with a very unique style."

The script was so outrageous that casting became difficult. Heather Graham's parents refused to let their daughter participate despite her fantastic read for the part of one of the titular Heathers, a trio of uber popular teens terrorizing their high school who meet their match with the arrival of a cold-blooded killer played by Christian Slater. Winona Ryder's agent got on her knees and begged the 15-year-old not to take the lead part of Veronica, convinced it would ruin her career. It didn't.

The studio (New World Pictures) was going bankrupt as the film hit theaters, which meant paltry P&A.

"It was a nightmare," Di Novi told *Entertainment Weekly* in 2014. "I paid for the ad in the *LA Times* myself for the second week. It was \$1,800, which to me was like \$18,000."

But the combination of a baby writer (who wrote the script hoping Stanley Kubrick would direct it) and a baby director shepherded by a baby producer brought it all together.

"Not a week goes by where somebody doesn't say, 'That's my favorite movie,' or, 'That movie changed my life,' or 'That movie saved me,'" says Di Novi.

After garnering credits on films like David Cronenberg's *Scanners* and *Videodrome*, Di Novi was made an offer by New World Pictures studio head Robert Rehme. "He said, 'You know all these young filmmakers and cool people in the business. I'm going to give you a little producing deal.' And I thought, 'Why not?'"

The first script that came her way was *Heathers*.

Heathers opened another door of opportunity for Di Novi. "It led me to Tim Burton, who had the courage to partner with me, someone who had little experience. We had a long and fruitful partnership." The dark humor of *Heathers* was a natural segue into Burton classics like *Edward Scissorhands*, *Batman Returns* and *Ed Wood*.

Most recently, Di Novi produced her first-ever limited series, *The Veil* on FX. Her description of it calls to mind the unconventionality in *Heathers*: "It's about two women who you think should be trying to kill each other but connect to their humanity and understand each other as women in ways that you would never anticipate."

"Somebody said to me a few years ago, 'All the projects you've produced are about people who feel like outsiders trying to find their way in the world.' That's one of the most powerful things art can do. It makes people feel like they're not the only one." ■