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Posted on Fri, Apr. 02, 2004

ILLINOIS STYLE: Much of rain-soaked movie is shot in McDonough County

TOM RADZ
 Associated Press

MACOMB, III. - On a recent sunny Monday afternoon, Macomb natives Christopher Gentry and Frank Herbert were praying for rain.

Gentry and Herbert, co-producers of the full-length feature film "Cast in Gray," chose locations throughout McDonough County as the setting for early scenes in the independent film, which is supposed to take place entirely in the pouring rain.

The cast and crew from Life is a Dream Productions, which was started by Gentry and writer/director I. Michael Toth, chose a location just north of the Macomb Speedway as one of five McDonough County locations.

"I just knew by reading the script that McDonough County had the kind of landscape that we were looking for," said Gentry. "We wanted to get the feel of emptiness and prairie, because that is very indicative of the main character's state of mind - he's very lost in his personal life."

"You come into a closely knit community like Macomb and everybody is excited by the experience and goes out of their way to show us the hospitality that really makes a difference in a production like this," added Herbert, who still resides in Macomb.

Because of the lack of precipitation in the last week, Gentry and Herbert relied on the Macomb Fire Department to provide water to their remote locations to produce the effect of rain.

"We also decided to use this opportunity as an educational benefit for theater students at the university," said Herbert, who invited Western Illinois University students to volunteer their assistance on the set.

"Cast in Gray" is based on the interaction between suicidal Chicago lawyer Tim McKay and a hitchhiker he meets in the rain. McKay, played by Tim Burke, is driving alone through the countryside, and offers the hitchhiker, played by Stephen Angus, and his dog shelter from the elements in his broken down SUV.

The conversation between McKay and the hitchhiker leads the two to exchange identities, which eventually ends in disaster for one of them.

"The thing that this film will really make people think about - and this is in a lot of Michael's writing - is

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how people look at themselves and how people react to the environment that they are in," said Gentry. "He wants people to look at themselves and not just be passive with their lives."

Although Gentry claims he and Herbert are looking into eventually selling "Cast in Gray" to a small independent distributor, he says he carries no hopes of Hollywood glory and plans to remain in the independent film industry.

"Michael and I decided that we wanted to make films that are meaningful," said Gentry. "Neither of us are interested in making commercial films for the sake of making money - we really see ourselves as artists."

While Gentry and Toth have made plans to create five feature films together, Herbert has not committed himself to future projects with Life is a Dream Productions, although he claims it is not an idea he would immediately dismiss.

The portion of production in McDonough County was completed in March, and the entire film was expected to be completed by the end of May, when Gentry and Herbert plan to release it to the festival circuit.

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