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Macomb gets "Cast in Gray"

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Vision

The otherwise plain and ordinary room was filled with weary souls. These individuals had traveled a journey that brought them a great distance on both the literal and metaphoric levels. With tired eyes, they raised cans and bottles high, as potent tones of exuberance and elation filled the air so thickly it was the only thing louder than the frequent laughter.

For Macomb, this party would be no ordinary celebration. This night would be no ordinary night.

Throughout the week, newspapers as far away as Peoria were littered with prominent stories on the independent film "Cast in Gray," which was being shot this week in Macomb. The cinematic work required the efforts of nearly 30 cast and crew members, not to mention help from Macomb residents, including the Macomb Fire Department.

With the vast majority of filming taking place on the rarely traveled rural roads just south of Macomb, the mood that was established could easily be described as gray, just as the film's title alludes to. The appeal of the flat, monotonous landscape of rural Macomb is easily understood when examining the film's premise; "Cast in Gray" follows the life of Tim McKay (played by actor Tim Burke), a successful lawyer living in Chicago with his wife of three years.

While seen by most as being quite successful, McKay isn't happy. Filled with feelings of sadness and disappointment, he entertains suicidal thoughts while driving down a lonely country road - even considering steering through the perpetual downfall into oncoming traffic.

But his chance encounter with a hitchhiker offers him the potential for something new. His ensuing journey forces both McKay and the audience to interpret the story's events and make unexpected translations as the plot progresses.

Beginning late last week, scenes involving this premise were shot in and around Macomb



Media Credit: Jonathan Hicks



Media Credit: Jonathan Hicks

Crew members share a laugh upon seeing the Macomb Journal's story on "Cast in Gray."



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, with the average day lasting around 16 hours. After three days of relentless work, their stay in Macomb had come to a close.

That's a wrap! For now.

On Wednesday at about 10 p.m., the scene at the Olson Special Dining Center was primarily celebratory. Smelling of pizza and beer, the room's mood and was one not unlike many probably felt around Macomb that night - the sort of feeling one gets when sitting around with good friends, just for the sake of being together.

While steadily eating and drinking, the crewmembers shared stories of the past week , of working together in Chicago, and of the excitement of completing an artpiece they were genuinely proud to be a part of. When copies of that day's Macomb Journal were passed around, the crew laughed at how good (or bad) certain people looked in photographs and read aloud the bits about others in the room.



Media Credit: Jonathan Hicks
Is that Antonio Banderas? Cinematographer Sasha Rendulic grins brightly while looking at photos of the day's shooting.

It made for a jovial scene and served to demonstrate that though extremely talented, these were people doing something they loved. It wasn't about press or publicity ... these individuals genuinely appreciated simply being a part of an art form they believed in.

Among those admirers and creators of art was Producer Christopher Gentry, a native of Macomb, and the man who suggested Macomb as a production site. He was a man who had a blurred line between work and fun and was, perhaps, the most excited person in the room that night. Actor Tim Burke, quiet and introspective, has a clear vision of his art and what it should be. He is the type who rarely speaks but commands the attention of all when he does. I. Michael Toth, writer, director and editor of "Cast in Gray," seemed far more interested in doing his work than talking about it. He has visionary-like qualities , though he is perhaps the only one who doesn't see them.

Stepping outside for a smoke break, the three men allow me inside the belly of the beast, casually sharing their thoughts on the inner workings of their craft.

The idea was a professional-style interview, and for the most part it was - though it was speckled with off-the-wall commentary and a comedic side that is not often revealed to the media. What follows are some of the highlights of the conversation:

Execution and explanation

Edge: So you guys are leaving tomorrow ...

Christopher Gentry: Yeah, "Antonio" has to get back to Los Angeles (laughs). That was the big thing going around - somehow the rumor got started that our cinematographer (Sasha Rendulic) was Antonio Banderas. We were at Aurelio's eating last Thursday, and within 24 hours we had cars passing the set with high school girls rolling down their windows yelling 'Antonio!'

Edge: Why Macomb? Besides the obvious connections, what's good about this lovely, rural area?

CG: That's exactly what's good about it. The script calls for a rural setting. It has to be desolate looking. We had to find a road that's not populated. This character breaks down on the road and he's there all day. So we needed to find something where it looked like he was stuck on the road. At the same time , we're visual artists ...

Tim Burke: There has to be a minimal aesthetic.

CG: Yeah. When I read the script I was thinking to myself this would be great down here because you can find these roads, where you just have prairie, you have trees and great topography here.

Edge: You mention the artistic aspects, the landscape ... What kind of role does that play and how does it establish the mood?

I. Michael Toth: You get stuck on the road and nobody's there for miles. The landscape here in Macomb really helped us create the feeling of being lost.

TB: The other thing is that landscape, especially in this film, becomes another character. It's constantly speaking to the audience. And you can do things as a filmmaker, as an actor, as any artist - you can either play in harmony with it, or you can play in contrast to it. The landscape and its minimal, dreamlike quality, with the rain, creates a vibrancy in the image so that as (the characters) speak, it adds so much to it.

CG: What's interesting on that point is that the film has no music, except for one song, which we just filmed tonight.

Edge: Do you think that some people who produce films are overzealous in the use of music?

IMT: A film works or it doesn't work. If you have to put music to tell people to feel something, it means that you've failed to create (a mood). You have to have some crutches in (the writing) to support that.

TB: In mainstream films, music adds a kind of skin. And that's another layer that's going to separate the audience from the activities within the story. What we've been doing is mostly conversations between two people, so if you add anything else, what you get is separation. And that works against the relationships that are happening in the film. So without music, without other incidental things, you're drawn more into the relationship between these characters. It becomes more immediate, more visceral , more effective.

Edge: For you guys the work is just beginning ... Where do you go from here?

TB: This cast and crew is from all over the country, all over the world. Our cinematographer has to go back to Los Angeles. I have to go back to outside New York. Stephen (Angus), our other actor, lives in Colorado. I'll be doing other work, other plays. But I'm happy this isn't finished just yet. Everything is gestation and bringing forth. These things get inside you. Every day on this shoot you find another layer , another meaning. We'll all go off and do our thing, but this is going to last with us for a long time. It's pretty powerful, and we've only just tapped it.

CG: We'll do some more shooting in Chicago and hopefully finish up shooting by the end of May. Then we'll spend 18 weeks editing and will look to enter the film into film festivals. Then we hope to get distribution for the film and within the next year it would be in theaters.

Edge: You filmed approximately the first 30 minutes of the film here. Will it be released as a short film first?

CG: Not necessarily. This piece we felt was really a solid first act. It really sets the character on his way for the rest of the movie. We did this in an approach that would be somewhat like Jim Jarmusch did "Stranger than Paradise." We're not swimming in money. We're not casting Antonio Banderas. We don't go that route. We're looking to really have our own voice and have our own say in how we make our film. We cast actors like Tim Burke. We went for great actors. We really do rely on, first and foremost, great actors. I know as a producer for Michael, that we can't produce a good, solid, beautiful piece of work unless it's believable. Sometimes when you try to get an actor for the sake of their name to play into the business part of it, you sort of shoot yourself in the foot. And that's no knock against actors that are stars - they become stars because they're great actors. But in Michael's writing, you need someone anonymous. To give you an example, Tom Cruise is a fantastic actor, but he carries some recognition with him - which is a good thing for financing, but it's a bad thing for the story.

TB: There's a good point to be made: That a big budget doesn't necessarily make a great film, and a small budget doesn't make, by any means, a lesser-quality film. Big budgets bring in all sorts of other things. To keep things in a Spartan quality, we were able to create the ethereal, kind of sublime atmosphere of the film that we want to convey. You wouldn't be able to do that if you had ridiculous amounts of money. The money isn't really an issue here. It's about the quality of the film.

Aspirations

With a clear vision of all aspects for "Cast in Gray," the film appears poised to make an impact on the independent film circuit. Gentry, Burke and Toth left no doubt of their dedication, not only to their respective crafts, but to this project in particular.

"Cast in Gray" will return to Macomb for further filming at some point, though specifics are yet to be determined. For more information on the film's plot, to donate to the project, or for more general information, visit www.castingraymovie.com.

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