

Funds flow from east in support of B.C. indie film

BY GLEN SCHAEFER, THE PROVINCE NOVEMBER 16, 2012



Actor David Richmond-Peck and director Merlin Dervisevic on the set of their movie Cruel and Unusual. (Bob Akester photo)

Coquitlam's old Riverview Hospital looks like hell on a grey, rainy filming day — or that is, a fictional movie's hell looks a lot like Riverview.

This day, the popular filming site is the gloomy setting for Vancouver writer-director Merlin Dervisevic's first feature, the dark mystery Cruel And Unusual.

"I tried to keep it as contained as possible," says Dervisevic of a story that stars B.C.'s David Richmond-Peck, as a nebbishy guy who finds himself in an afterlife counselling session, amid a group of souls with guilty secrets in their pasts.

Dervisevic's cameras started rolling courtesy of the Toronto-based Canadian Film Centre, which is backing a B.C.-made feature for the first time in its 20-year film production program.

The centre had kept its film projects in Ontario until it struck a partnership with theatrical distributor eOne Films and broadcasters Movie Central and the Movie Network that allowed it to throw some help further west.

So Dervisevic got pre-production input from the writing-directing team behind the sci-fi hit, Splice, \$600,000 to make the movie, and the finished film will make it to theatres and to television courtesy

of the CFC's partners.

"A lot of independent films die because the filmmakers focus so much on getting the film made that they can't really think past what happens after you make it," Dervisevic says. "We already have our distributor involved, it gives me comfort to know that."

The CFC picked his script from 100 hopefuls just over two years ago, starting a process that drew in a cast of already busy B.C. players.

Richmond-Peck (V, Fringe) agreed to gain more than 30 pounds to play main character Edgar.

"I was eating three burgers a night, so we'll see what happens when I try to lose it over Christmas," he says, adding that the fictional Edgar is done in by obsessive jealousy over his mail-order overseas bride.

"You've got this character who's a complete loser, this out-of shape slob," Richmond-Peck says. "There's very few opportunities to play characters like this. You never see a lead role in a movie, or rarely, about someone so pathetic."

Richard Harmon (The Killing, Continuum) feared that a scheduling conflict with the U.S. mini-series Bates Motel might keep him from a role as a homicidal teen in Dervisevic's project.

"But it completely worked out," Harmon says, adding he was blind-sided by the twists in Dervisevic's script. "He did things I couldn't comprehend, I didn't know how he was going to write his way out of the holes he got into. He would just come up with a beautiful solution out of left field. I was blown away by what Merlin did with it."

Dervisevic says he wrote the script with the CFC in mind.

"We have six main cast and two main locations," says Dervisevic, who studied at the Vancouver Film School and with the CFC in Toronto, and has worked as a set decorator on B.C.-filmed TV series. "I've worked in film enough to know where the money goes. The whole story takes place in one day, there's no wardrobe changes, minimal set design."

With three weeks filming on Cruel And Unusual nearly finished, the CFC's Justine Whyte says they're looking for other B.C. projects to support. The centre was founded by veteran director Norman Jewison to train and support emerging filmmakers, and to support indie-film projects.

"This is totally an opportunity for Vancouver filmmakers," says Whyte. "We've been doing this for a while now, but I don't think people see it. I'm hoping that with Cruel And Unusual we'll see an increase in applications."

Among the 21 films the CFC has backed are 2008's love story Nurse.Fighter.Boy, the 1997 sci-fi hit Cube, and the 1995 urban drama Rude, which went to the Cannes Film Festival and was named best Canadian feature at that year's Toronto International Film Festival.

Filmmakers can go to cfccreates.com to find out more.

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