

Trading places

Golf pro's daughter playing in U.S. Amateur.
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LaGrange Daily

Labor of love



Dena Levitz, Daily News

Chris Jones, the movie's steady-camera operator, follows actors Terrence Mann (James Good) and Liza Vann (Jo Ann Good) while filming a scene in the woods behind the set house in Troup County.

Cast, crew work to get film's message out

By Dena Levitz
Staff Writer

The scene is simple enough.

Headphones cradle the director's ears as he nods or shakes his head in response to each image on the screen. As he watches the scene being shot a half dozen others sit around the semicircular television area, which is littered with water bottles and packs of cigarettes.

But behind the simplicities, executive producer Cheryl Elliott says there has been air of magic.

For the last two weeks a small cast and crew has been filming the Vietnam-inspired movie "A Circle on the Cross" in and around LaGrange. Those involved with the filming have done work on such big pictures as "Remember the Titans" and "October Sky" and the Broadway play "Cats."

"I cannot afford these people," executive producer Steven Earl-Edwards said.

Yet cast and crew members have forfeited their salaries so that all of the film's meager \$75,000 bud-

get will go toward the production quality.

Hair, makeup and wardrobe departments, for example, normally require several workers apiece. But here they all are being handled by one woman: Kelly Brennan, who is accustomed to working on larger movies and

HBO feature films.

"It's different, but the elements are the same," she said between takes. "With this kind of a project, all of us can pitch in."

Edwards said each person's belief in the project and its strong message has brought him or her to



'A Circle on the Cross' director Stephen Maloney rehearses a scene with lead actor Mann and executive producer and actor Steven Earl-Edwards (Billy Good).

LaGrange.

"There's a realness here," he said on the close-knit movie set. "... It's nice to remember why we got into the business in the first place."

The story is about American prisoner of war James Good, who returns home to his family in 1992 after 20 years. It's not a true story, but Edwards said the plot is based on extensive research into the war and what veterans went through to survive.

He said the film has a universal message.

"It's about human perseverance, ... saying that, 'Even though I'm a prisoner, I'm in control,'" he said.

When he returns home, Good, played by Broadway star Terrence Mann, finds his wife, Jo Ann, portrayed by Liza Vann, has married his brother, while his son Chester, played by LaGrange College graduate Ryan McWhorter, is now a 20-year-old rebel.

The ending "has taken people and set them back in their seats," Edwards said. "It

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Vietnam Memorial prompted film's title

By Dena Levitz
Staff Writer

White, all-capital lettering glimmers off its dark granite backdrop. Overall 58,229 names span the almost 20-year-old Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., each name separated only by a small dot.

Diamonds around the names stand for those soldiers confirmed dead, crosses mark those missing in action and a circle around a cross stands for life, meaning a prisoner of war has returned, seemingly from the dead.

This last symbol is the origin of the title of Thomas Cadwalder Jones' play "A Circle on the Cross," which is being made into a feature film in LaGrange. The main character is an American prisoner of war trying to have a circle placed around his cross.

Steven Earl-Edwards, who pushed for the movie to be made, said he was hours away from fighting in the Viet-

nam War. He never had to serve, but Edwards' ROTC commander was killed in combat. Pointing to his commander's bracelet, which he always keeps on his wrist, Edwards said the movie's premise is "very special."

"Making the film has been a journey for me," he said. "I want to get this story out there."

Vietnam was one of the most divisive wars in American history, so those drafted to fight became very unpopular, said Edwards, executive producer of the film.

"There's this dichotomy," he said. "They didn't have a choice. Still, people got angry with these veterans when they came back."

The film aims to honor the men and women who fought in Vietnam but, in the process, not to cause them additional pain because of its realism, said executive producer Cheryl Elliott. The recent film "We Were Soldiers" and

other Vietnam-era movies have caused veterans setbacks, she said.

"It's almost as if the government created killing machines and never expected them to come back," she said.

Of the more than 58,000 names on the wall, 1,300 feature crosses. Elliott said through research she's learned that many men with families at home tended to fight cautiously in Vietnam and ended up losing their lives. A large portion of survivors were soldiers who expected to die and now are "living with the nightmares of it."

When "A Circle on the Cross" was performed as a play at LaGrange College, Edwards said the Vietnam War was as foreign to the students as World War I was to him. So he brought in several veterans to speak with the cast and crew.

"Once they knew more, they were touched ... crying," he said. "They met these veterans, and they couldn't believe it."



Dena Levitz/Daily News

Between takes, Vann and Mann use mini-fans to cool off.

MOVIE PAGE 2

hits them so hard it makes them think and rethink any preconceived ideas they've ever had."

"A Circle on the Cross" was originally a play in New York written by Thomas Cadwalder Jones and co-starring Edwards, who has been an associate professor of drama at LaGrange College for the last 10 years.

Two years ago Edwards asked Jones, who had been his script-writing professor, if he could take the production to the college level and "tweak it" slightly. The professor did, and the college students performed the award-winning play six times in March 2001.

Edwards then wanted to follow through on a dream he'd always had to expand the story to film.

"It was an idea nurtured in my head that 'you don't know unless you try,'" he said.

Jones and Edwards became co-screenwriters, whittling down the script from 116 pages to about 70. They never consider altering the plot line, but changes needed to be made to tell the story in a more visual way.

"The structure of a play repeats a lot ... with lots of dialogue," Edwards said. "But with a movie you want to allow the camera to tell the story."

After local investors made contributions, the project was no longer just a pipe dream.

"Then it took on a life of its own," Edwards said.

Originally, Edwards, who plays James' brother William, was to direct, but Irish director Stephen Maloney stepped in, which will allow Edwards to focus on his acting and producing duties.

"It's a real blessing for him," Elliott said about Edwards, whose background is in theater. "He has such a passion for the story so he's able to convey it through acting and have someone else interpret it visually."

LaGrange has become a good base for the project because of Edwards' connec-

tion to the town. The opening scene, in which Good is in Vietnam, was shot on the property of Joey and Paula Keith, owners of Charlie Joseph's restaurants, and another scene was to be filmed inside The Idle Hour pub.

Shooting recently was being done at a private residence near West Point, which was transformed into the Good home. Down a rocky driveway sits the Video Village, where production members can watch the scene while it's being filmed. Walkie talkies serve as communication bridges between crew members while the actors take their marks behind the residence. Between rehearsing the reunion scene between James and Jo Ann, Mann - in full soldier's uniform - holds up a mini fan while Vann sprays insect repellent onto her legs sticking out beneath a floral skirt.

Filming is expected to wrap up today, then post-production work will begin. Using records of good takes, Maloney will pull together a number of selected scenes to make the director's cut - what Elliott referred to as a rough version of how he envisions "A Circle on the Cross."

Music will be added, sound dubbed, and transitions and pacing set during the fine-edit stage.

The premiere most likely will be in March. The completed movie will be entered in several film festivals over the next year with the hope of securing a distributor for limited theatrical release.

For the filmmakers, the paycheck was never the goal. Getting the movie's message out to as many people as possible was much more important.

Elliott said her involvement with the film is tied to her life philosophy to do things that are worthwhile.

"What you leave behind matters," she said.

And she hopes the movie leaves audiences with a sense of tribute and honor.

Local weather

MONDAY TUESDAY WEDNESDAY



Georgia Weather Rainfall

24-Hrs Month

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