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Cry me a river: Why Hollywood hates filming on wild waterways

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Roger Rapoport McClatchy-Tribune News Service | Posted: Friday, October 15, 2010 1:00 am | No Comments Posted

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Robert Cicchini, left, and Chase Maser in a scene from the independent film "Waterwalk." (Courtesy of Michigan Blue Lake Productions/MCT)

OCONTO FALLS, Wis. — It was a dreamy Sunday morning in Oconto Falls, a day to sleep late, have a relaxing picnic on the Oconto River and troll for trout. But at 7:30 a.m. the scene at the launch ramp parking lot off Chicken Shack Road looked like a lead drowning story on the evening news. A fire truck, ambulance, dive team, and EMT workers were all milling about. Frogmen were combing the waters. Boats circled in the vicinity of Stiles Dam.

This apparent nightmare was all part a project that even the boldest Hollywood studio will try to avoid — a drama co-starring a river.

Scarier to producers than the IRS or a month of court-ordered rehab, river scripts are a very tough sell. Film studio moguls have produced just four major river films in the past four decades: "Deliverance," "A River Runs Through It," "The River Wild" and "Without a Paddle."

That all of these films did well at the box office might make you think enterprising producers would be down by the riverside shooting sure-fire hits.

Think again. Hollywood will do just about anything to avoid getting its feet wet.

"Everything on the water is twice as hard," says Hollywood cinematographer Bruce Schermer. Video, sound and lighting equipment can be destroyed by water damage or lightning and getting a stable image on a boat listing to starboard is always a challenge.

My own baptism on this subject came this summer during the monthlong production of "Waterwalk," the true story of Steve and Justin Faulkner, who set out to become the first two-person team to canoe the 1,000-mile Marquette/Joliet discovery route of the Mississippi from St. Ignace, Mich., to St. Louis via Lake Michigan, Green Bay, the Fox, Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers. That original 1673 expedition was led by a Jesuit priest, who had plenty to pray about.

Our team quickly discovered why we were the first film crew attempting to follow this nearly impossible route. The problems began in Appleton, Wis., where we had to cancel the first week of shooting along the Fox River corridor in eastern Wisconsin because heavy rains put this tributary near flood stage.

Our shoot shifted to Portage, Wis., where lead actors Bob Cicchini and Chase Maser paddled down the Wisconsin. Although the river was running high, it remained navigable until we reached the confluence of the Mississippi.

Our plan was to put in at Wyalusing State Park near the point where Father Marquette discovered the Mississippi. But, when we arrived, the launch ramps were flooded, forcing us to hitch a ride down the river on the Mississippi Explorer cruise boat captained by a longtime Big Muddy river pilot, Jack Libby.

Launching the canoes from the back of his excursion boat solved that problem. With his help, we were even able to safely shoot a near-collision with a barge. But as we headed back to the historic port of Prairie Du Chien, Wis., Jack explained that currents on the southern end of our planned route were running 14 miles an hour. That meant a whole series of shots along the Mississippi River section of the route near St. Louis had to shift to safer waters to the north.

Cheating these lower Mississippi locations in the Prairie Du Chien, Wis./Dubuque, Iowa, sector meant finding stretches in Wisconsin and Iowa that were ringers for river shots we had planned to the south.

After wrapping up the southern end of the trip, our production team returned to the now calmer Fox where a series of dams required difficult portages through mosquito-infested waters.

One of the key scenes in the script, based on Steve Faulkner's book "Waterwalk," required the actors to leap into the flood stage Fox as their canoe tumbled over the lower Appleton dam. This location was too dangerous and we moved the scene to Oconto, where two stuntmen jumped into the dammed river as their canoe swamped. Unfortunately, a barrier on Stiles dam blocked the canoe from tumbling over the top. It took half an hour of tugging and pulling to send the canoe over the 30-foot drop.

Lake Michigan, where 70 people drowned this summer, was another big challenge. Our plan to limit canoe flipping to shallow waters worked but at times the breakers made it impossible to get a cameraman in the canoe for close-ups. And just after we finished our water shoot both the Mississippi and the Wisconsin Rivers flooded.

Which may explain why we never ran into another film crew on this 1,000-mile route.

Roger Rapoport co-wrote "Waterwalk" (www.waterwalkthemovie.com) with Richard Harris.

BEFORE YOU SHOOT YOUR INDEPENDENT FILM

If you're planning to shoot an independent film, here are a few tips.

☐ Frequently read your script aloud. Even better, have actors read it for you. The more you hear the dialogue the quicker you will spot obvious problems. It's similar to a staged reading for a play.

☐ Local guides are critical. You need to know the neighborhoods where you are shooting. We were mooned twice by kids in a passing car during a middle of the night shoot at a bookstore in eastern Wisconsin. A local director of economic development quickly got the police to set up a roadblock.

☐ Go off script when you see something better than what you wrote. We wrote a St. Ignace, Mich., scene with an actor playing Ojibwa elder at a campground that was quickly trumped by a chance encounter with a real Ojibwa elder at Marquette's gravesite. This led to a new scene that was far better than our planned shot.

☐ Always use two cameras. It's much faster and you'll save money in the long run. I'm a fan of the Sony EX-1 and EX-3.

☐ Cast with local theater companies. Inevitably, they have a talented pool of actors who are particularly helpful on remote location shoots.

☐ Serve a good lunch. Cast and crew will mutiny over a Subway tuna sandwich or Little Caesar's. The better the catering the better the movie.

☐ And finally, if you don't only do one thing on this list check out the wonderful list of recommended reading at the back of Producer Tony Bill's wonderful book "Movie Speak" (Workman). The common thread that runs through this list of classic film books is ideal for everyone on the set. You'll laugh and cry and eliminate the kinds of mistakes that experts hadn't made.

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