PORTAGE DAILY REGISTER

Independent movie films in Portage; 'Waterwalk' tells of father, son, as well as Marquette, Joliet

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By Shannon Green, Daily Register | Posted: Sunday, August 22, 2010 11:40 pm | (0) Comments

It's a story that needs to be told, and Portage is where it started.

Portage got a taste of filmmaking last week as cast and crew visited various locations in the area and began shooting "Waterwalk," an independent feature film based on Steve Faulkner's true story of a father and son who in 1996 retraced the 1,000-mile 1673 journey of French explorers Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet.

Produced by Michigan Blue Lake Production Co., the film is being shot on location in Wisconsin and Michigan. The first day of photography took place in Portage on Tuesday.

Producer Roger Rapoport said the decision to film on location was considered carefully.

It takes time to reproduce locations when filmmakers "cheat" and use a soundstage or green screen, according to Rapoport. While shooting on location creates logistical issues, it lends an important factor to the film: authenticity.

"It makes a much better movie," Rapoport said.

Filming before a green screen - inside a building - also cannot reproduce nature.

"Swatting mosquitoes is part of the realism," Rapoport said, referring to the clouds of the annoying insects that plagued cast and crew near the Historic Indian Agency House during filming Tuesday afternoon.

Actor and co-director Robert Cicchini, who portrays Faulkner in the film, said he is enjoying the chance to get to know the residents at each location - including the Columbia County residents he's met, all of whom have been welcoming.

"It's a nice human connection," Cicchini said.

It is a film that will show the beauty of the Midwest.

"Wisconsin is absolutely gorgeous," Rapoport said.

For Rapoport, filming in Portage and other locations generates an audience - residents will have an interest in the film that has a local connection, and others may want to visit the sites that are in the film.

"It actually should develop some tourism," Rapoport said.

Rapoport said he is impressed by the high level of talent in Wisconsin - he is using local actors for about 20 smaller roles.

The purpose of the journey in 1673 by Marquette and Joliet was to map the route of the Mississippi from the Straits of Mackinac in northern Michigan, along the Fox River to the Wisconsin River - including a portage between the rivers in what is now Portage on June 14, 1673 - and on to St. Louis.

Faulkner, accompanying the filming on Tuesday, said the book took about a decade to write; it is a "reflective father-son story," about relationships, history and the Midwest.

Faulkner said it was somewhat strange to see an actor portray him.

"It's amazing," Faulkner said.

Faulkner remembers Portage during the journey in 1996: He arrived with Alex in the dark, coming down the Fox River and camping in a farmer's field with cattle. It was hot - about 90 degrees on an early July day.

He recalls having a hamburger at Tamarack Pizza and visiting a bookstore, where he learned that John Muir grew up in the area.

He also remembers a fortunate turn of events that allowed him to see the Zona Gale Center.

"I was excited to see her house," Faulkner said of his visit in 1996.

The book is a "very intense personal story" and is very focused on the Midwest, Rapoport said.

As a publisher of travel books, Rapoport has read many stories; he was greatly impressed with Faulkner.

"Steve's book was the best original travel book I've ever read," Rapoport said.

"It's like going on a road trip, except it is in a canoe," he added.

Rapoport said the film is a "fictionalized" adaptation of the book to emphasize the interaction between father and son.

It is also a story about Marquette and Joliet's 1673 travels - one that needs to be told, according to Rapoport.

"This story has never been filmed," Rapoport said.

He plans to include a 15-minute documentary about the travels of Marquette and Joliet, using local history experts and the knowledge of Matt Blessing, director of special collections at Marquette University's Raynor Library, who is serving as a consultant on the project.

For Portage, Rapoport sought the knowledge of Robert "Doc" Curtis, who Blessing interviewed for the documentary, which will be an "extra" feature on the DVD of the film.

Other locations for filming include Green Bay, De Pere, Appleton, Neenah, Menasha, Lake Wisconsin, Spring Green, Muscoda and Boscobel.

The film is scheduled for release in spring 2011; what is rare for an independent film, according to Rapoport, is that "Waterwalk" has a distribution agreement with three major theater chains, including Milwaukee-based Marcus Theaters.

The film will be showcased at the theaters with special premiere events across the Midwest, including Portage, Rapoport said.

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