

Sanibel Film, Bright Idea

Locals strut their stuff in Chris Bright's film set largely in Bailey's



by **Libby Boren McMillan**

If all goes according to plan, in a few months it might be possible to see Bailey's General Store on the big screen at the Telluride or Sundance film festival. Film director Chris Bright's independent film *The Battle of Melanie Carson* wound up being a Southwest Florida production after Bright moved his company from Chicago to the Fort Myers area a year ago.

"A little over a third of the movie takes place at Bailey's," he says, detailing a storyline in which both main characters work at a grocery. Bright spells out the film's big question: "If you're stuck in small town USA, and you're not happy but you're comfortable," he says, "and you have the opportunity to risk everything to go for what you want, to achieve your dream . . . would you do it? Even if it meant risking everything and probably failing?"

The film's entire cast and production crew is from Southwest Florida, with the exception of one actress from Fort Lauderdale. Bright was surprised at

the high performance levels he witnessed during shooting. "I'm getting incredible performances from the crew," he bragged of a cast that includes Lynn Schneider, director of PR for Shell Point Retirement Community. Schneider was so helpful she also became a producer on the film. The cast was rounded out by locals Ashley Green and Sarah DeGeorge.

"Sarah's role was a little bit more substantial," says Bright. "I never found anyone I liked for the role at casting call, so I talked it over with my producer and said, 'We'll find someone at the store.' It turned out great when Richard Johnson [manager of Bailey's] told his crew about the film." Quite a few employees inquired about the possibility of a role, and there was one larger speaking role, and one smaller speaking role that needed filling. Sarah DeGeorge landed the larger role.

"There are parts of it that are very, very funny," says Bright. "If I hadn't found the amazing talent that I did to do this, it wouldn't be nearly as funny."

Flip Minott of Minott Linders Motion Pictures served as cinematographer. In addition to the grocery scenes, some days the crew was shooting at Bowman's Beach. "This required every single ounce of heart and passion, and I have gotten that," says Bright of his team. "We actually had one 19-hour shoot on a Sunday after a weather day on Saturday."

Bright's plans, prior to wrapping the film, included some local test screenings at FGCU and Edison. He was sincerely hoping to premier *The Battle of Melanie Carson* at BIG Arts' Schein Performance Hall. He also hoped to get showings on a biweekly basis at the Island Cinema, Regal Bell Tower 20 Theater, and Regal Gulf Coast Town Center 16.

Independent films rarely have distribution deals up front and rely on limited showings and film festivals to get the buzz going. "If I can get any festival wins," he says, "we can ramp up for next year's Telluride film fest and then Sundance in Park City."

“We couldn’t even ask for a better group of people to work,” he says. “The Bailey brothers [Sam and Francis], Richard Johnson, Chad Nave at BIG Arts. Everyone at BIG Arts has been great. So doing the premier out there would be great.” Bright extended his praise to the City. “The City of Sanibel was fantastic,” he said. “They didn’t require a permit. Sanibel was so great to us.”

This film is Bright’s fourth; his earlier works include two short fictional films and a documentary on the pollution of Lake Michigan. Consequently, he has already spoken with the PUURE organization about the similar problems Lake Okeechobee is facing.

At the tender age of twenty-six, Bright also has a recording label—Bright Idea Records—with five artists. He produced his own musical CD while still in high school and sold seven thousand copies. The third division of his company is Bright Idea Stage, a traveling improv theater troupe.

Bright credits renegade director Robert Rodriguez as a main source of inspiration. “His book, *Rebel Without a Crew*, showed how he made a full-length motion picture called *El Mariachi* for only seven thousand dollars,” marvels Bright. “He subjected himself to a medical experiment to earn the first three thousand. Then he borrowed a camera, bought props and film, and served as cameraman, crew and editor to shoot the film. It got picked up at Sundance and then he got a deal at ICM.” *El Mariachi* grossed \$2 million in the USA; its sequel was titled *Desperado*.

Bright, so aptly named, has had his own successes such as small and regional film fest wins for his earlier works. Will *The Battle of Melanie Carson* be the next *El Mariachi*? Bright’s goals are to pay his crew and make a living doing what he loves. Anything else is gravy. “My thing is that you’ve got to have passion about what you do. This is art,” he says, “and it’s alive and it’s something you’ve really got to feel.” 🐦

Libby Boren McMillan is a freelance writer for Times of the Islands.

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