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Eek - Watch out for 'Willows Way' (photo slideshow)

By David Harry Editor- Lakes Region Weekly

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NEW GLOUCESTER (Feb 1, 2008): Something eerie is coming to the farms and fields around Damariscotta.

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[0] When the movie "Willows Way" arrives on DVD in late April, local film lovers can see mid-coast Maine as the setting of a science fiction story involving the consequences of returning the dead to life. Better yet for producers Kevin and Ralph DiBacco, of the New Gloucester-based DiBacco Films, a just-announced deal with York Entertainment will take the 83-minute film to an international audience on DVD, in theaters and on TV.

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Kevin DiBacco, left, told his brother Ralph, "you write something, I will produce it." The result is "Willows Way," which was picked up by York Entertainment for distribution on DVD, in theaters and on TV in about 50 countries. (Photo by courtesy)

Shot on a budget of approximately \$100,000 in about two months last summer, "Willows Way" brought together local crew, actors and scenery so successfully that DiBacco Films received two distribution offers.

In working with York Entertainment, the brothers have joined forces with a company that adds about 50 adventure and science fiction films each year to distribute throughout the world.

The deal ensures a ready market for "Willows Way" and allows the brothers to work on a sequel.

However, competition between states using economic incentives could well mean the sequel will be shot more than 2,000 miles away, in New Mexico.

"Willows Way" stars C. James Roberts, known for his stage work at the Saco River Grange Hall in Buxton and for his appearances in the Andy Davis zombie movie, "2," and the psychological thriller, "Mr. Barrington." Both movies were shot in southern Maine.



Actors Karl Steudel, left, and C. James Roberts rehearse a scene from "Willows Way." Screenwriter Ralph DiBacco said he was very impressed with the way the cast worked through scenes he had written before shooting them. (Photo by courtesy)

In the movie, Roberts, as Jakob Lazar, invokes the help of a celestial visitor to travel back in time to save his son's life. When the celestial visitor has reservations about his actions and threatens the future of the town, Lazar must choose between saving his son and saving the town.

Advance orders for the DVD can be made at Amazon.com, F.Y.E., TBS or Movies Unlimited. A premiere for the movie is tentatively scheduled for May 8 at the Wyndham Hotel in South Portland.

Internationally, the film will be distributed mostly in Europe, but in as many as 50 countries.

The DiBacco brothers each moved to Maine about a decade ago from Connecticut. Kevin DiBacco began working at WMTW-TV in Portland producing commercials before striking out on his own with DiBacco Films, which has produced commercials, infomercials for Portland restaurants and hotels and a video for comedian Bob Marley.

Ralph DiBacco, who uses the pen name Raffaele DiBacco, has worked as an insurance underwriter but always wanted to write. While publishing some science fiction short stories, the Gorham resident also took an 18-month screenwriting course.

After creating a short film using an anthology of Ralph DiBacco's stories called "Mars Hill" in 2000, the brothers wanted to make a longer feature.

"You write something and I will produce it," is what Kevin DiBacco told his brother in 2006. While Ralph DiBacco felt comfortable getting to work on a longer screenplay because of the course, Kevin attended seminars on

filmmaking in California that left him with more questions than answers.

The two decided to take the plunge anyway, working 14-hour days, seven days a week, for four months. The hours were arduous, but the fragmented nature of creating the movie was even tougher for Kevin DiBacco.

“You are just doing pieces of it, you can’t get a feel of what it is all like,” DiBacco said. While editing a 30-second commercial may take four hours, the sequence is still linear when shooting it.

With “Willows Way,” Kevin DiBacco was directing a movie shot in segments based on the time of day for individual scenes. Ensuring continuity, accuracy and flow between the scenes worried him. Cast and crew all carried digital cameras to record the position of the sun, and physical details of each set and actor, so when a scene was picked up the next day it would look as though it was shot all at once.

The digital cameras were a small measure of the camaraderie and hard work from the cast and crew. Web ads placed on sites like Craig’s List brought together crew and cast, including Will Fraser, an associate producer of the movie.

Fraser recommended the shooting location – his grandfather’s farm in Damariscotta. The land had all the ingredients needed for shooting – a barn, a willow tree, water, and a field where a cemetery could be created.

After working on reality-TV shows in southern California, Fraser said, filming in Maine was much more a labor of love where the whole cast and crew invested itself in making things work.

Fraser also said the script appeals to all age groups, who will get different feelings from the movie as they watch it.

Ralph DiBacco admitted the location was not precisely what he envisioned, but adaptability is integral to any small budget feature, and the writer said he was ultimately delighted with the location. Additional scenes were shot at the United Methodist Church in Naples and WPXT studios in Westbrook.

The DiBacco brothers were ecstatic to have such solid actors in the production, and Kevin DiBacco said the acting in the film is what ultimately sold the movie to distributors.

With Fraser came Matt Fletcher, a 23-year-old Waterboro resident who studied film production at Southern Maine Community College. Fletcher was one of many students who answered the call and gained valuable experience as interns.

A boom operator for the shooting, Fletcher was charged with keeping a microphone above the actors while making sure it was never in view of the camera. He also recalled how cast and crew came together for things like rocking a car and shaking branches above it for the climactic scene in the film.



Matt Fletcher, 23, was one of the students from Southern Maine Community College who worked on the production crew of "Willows Way." Fletcher operated a boom, keeping the microphone as close to the action as possible while also out of camera range. (Photo by courtesy)

"They were the best workers I've ever had," said Kevin DiBacco. "No interns were taking notes, they were moving dolleys and lifting booms."

Ralph DiBacco remains impressed at the way the cast, including Casey McDougal and Karl Steudel, met to work out the scenes and dialogue before shooting scenes.

"It really can't be 100 percent of what you visualize," he said. "But it can be better than that. I was totally blown away by the way they played and interacted in the final scene."

It took Kevin DiBacco almost two months to get the whole context of "Willows Way" as he assembled the individual scenes. He was working in a rush - his goal was to have the movie ready for presentation at the American Film Market, an annual show held in Santa Monica, Calif., in November.

The five-day convention of screenings and seminars is held each November, but DiBacco sent trailers of "Willows Way" to the top 100 science fiction film distributors in the world before the convention began. "We got bites right off the bat," he said.

The bites turned into a deal with York Entertainment, which opens more doors for other financing after the DiBacco brothers made "Willows Way" with their own money.

"It's fun to make movies, but not out of your own pocket," said Kevin DiBacco.

As the brothers prepare for the April release and May premiere of the movie, Ralph DiBacco is developing the script for a sequel, "Willows Way 2: Al'ael's Revenge." While he expects it to be less action-oriented than the first movie, DiBacco said he is still developing outlines and plots using software

for screenwriters.

“I can’t just throw things on paper,” he said.

York Entertainment will have right of first refusal on the sequel, which Kevin DiBacco said could likely be filmed in New Mexico.

“Obviously, we would like to stay here, but when it is a smaller budget, better incentives make a huge difference,” DiBacco added. The total budget for “Willows Way’ did not reach the \$250,000 needed to earn tax breaks from the Maine Film Office.

In New Mexico, filmmakers are offered a 25 percent tax rebate on production expenditures with no minimum spending required.

Kevin DiBacco said he and Davis, the Porter native who has shot “MUD” and “2” among other films in Maine, have lamented the difficulties of financing smaller budget films in Maine.

“Somebody better do something quick, or you are going to lose all the indie filmmakers there are,” he said.

*Based in , Editor- Lakes Region Weekly David Harry can be reached at or by e-mail at dharry@keepmecomcurrent.com. **Lakes Region Weekly**, your local news and community online, for the southern Maine towns of Windham, Standish, Raymond, Sebago, Naples, Casco, Bridgton, Gray, and New Gloucester and drops in Falmouth, Yarmouth, Cumberland and Poland.*

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