

Filmmaker explores belonging, loss in 'Islander'

By Ethan Gilsdorf, Globe Correspondent | March 4, 2007

Thomas Hildreth's family has owned property for decades on Vinalhaven, Maine. But to those born on the island, he will always be "from away."

That's the almost derisive term island natives use to refer to mainlanders. The tension between locals and outsiders -- and amid those who leave and those who stay behind -- forms the backbone of "Islander," Hildreth's new film that opens at the Kendall Square Cinema Friday.

"There's a clear distinction between those who have been there for generations and those who go there for summers for 'only' a 100 years," said Hildreth. As a kid, he summured on Vinalhaven. His grandfather was even governor of Maine in the 1940s. Still, he said, islanders largely considered him an intruder.

"The only problem is when you try to pretend [to be local] when you're really not," said Hildreth, 42, in a telephone interview while on a skiing vacation in Alta, Utah. "I would never consider myself a local."

The Williamstown Theatre Festival veteran co-wrote the script, produced the film, and plays lead Eben Cole, a lobsterman whose bullish reaction to mainlanders fishing in island waters has devastating results. After a prison term, Hildreth's character returns to the remote island to discover his personal life has capsized, and he must chart a course for personal redemption. Cape Cod native Amy Jo Johnson ("Felicity," "Wildfire," "ER") stars as Cole's wife, Cheryl. Philip Baker Hall ("Magnolia," "Boogie Nights"), Ron Canada ("Cinderella Man"), and Larry Pine ("The Royal Tenenbaums") play supporting roles, alongside regional actors and several locals with no previous acting experience.

Intrigued with a real story about a man who had committed a crime and returned to the island about 10 miles offshore from Rockland after serving his time, Hildreth began writing the screenplay with director Ian McCrudden. The two had worked together on both the play and film versions of "Mr. Smith Gets a Hustler." With the script done, they traveled to Vinalhaven, one of Maine's few remaining self-sufficient fishing communities, to scout locations for a June 2005 shoot.

"[Hildreth] said this would make a great backdrop for a movie and I agreed," said McCrudden, who also directed a surf-horror movie, "Trespassers," and another indie drama, "The Big Day." "My uncle and brother are commercial fishermen in Alaska. When I saw how big a part of the community lobstering is, it seemed a natural fit, to anchor the drama in that way of life."

But getting Vinalhaven residents to let the production company use the island as the primary location was another matter. Locals were understandably skeptical -- and protective -- of their isolated home. The filmmakers wanted to get their take on it right.

"We showed them the script. 'This is the story we are trying to tell,'" said Hildreth. "Word got out that 'These guys are OK.'" He got locals to give actors technical advice on boating and lobstering jargon. He also wanted to be clear "Islander" was no misguided Hollywood production bent on either ridiculing the natives or thumbing its nose at their hard-won, flinty way of life.

"A big-budget movie would have parked their honey-wagons up and down the island," said Hildreth. "And the island would have shut them down." The crew shot in real locations, in real people's homes. "We didn't dress it up because it wasn't in the budget. The island was like a big movie lot."

They also needed to be sensitive to local customs. McCrudden recalled a pivotal scene in the filming, where a lobsterman gets snarled by a trap line and is yanked overboard. To McCrudden, the stunt work seemed obvious: They'd stage the mock drowning with a dummy.

"That was tricky. I got into a pickle with that," McCrudden said via telephone from Los Angeles. "I had written it that way and had storyboarded it one way, with a dummy going overboard."

But the captain of the boat they had chartered wouldn't let him. Lobstermen are superstitious about drownings. "[He] said, 'Nothing going overboard. No pretend people. No nothing.' " McCrudden found a way to shoot the scene without actually showing a body.

Another delicate detail: the question of the notoriously hard to mimic Maine accent. Countless movies goof when actors try to do a crusty Yankee or Southie patois; think of the varied results in this year's Oscar best picture, "The Departed."

Hildreth was conscious of the problem, but didn't want "Islander" to be "about the accent," he said. "Productions get trapped and they end up hitting the accent too hard and it ends up being a caricature and the truth goes out the window."

Luckily, one local spoke her own truth. Amy Jo Johnson played Cheryl as someone from an unspecified off-island place, but to the trained ear, it's clearly Boston. As it turns out, Johnson was raised in Dennis, on Cape Cod.

"I took the accent I had grown up with, and being out there in that environment it just came out naturally," Johnson said via phone from Montreal. "I thought of the way my sister talks. When I go back to the Cape and I get drunk, it comes back."

Johnson said she played the tough-talking and devastated wife from the gut. "I just tried to use my instincts and went for it," said the actress and singer-songwriter. "A lot of people, they see the movie and afterwards they say 'Your character is so angry. I didn't like her.' I didn't find that at all. She's a fighter. [She has to figure out] how to survive on this island after [Eben] sort of screwed up their lives."

In "Islander," whether an individual like Eben Cole survives and redeems himself depends on the whole community. "On an island we're all related," Cole says at the end of the film. "Whether we like to think so or not."

It's a truism the filmmakers seem to have taken to heart as well.

"It was so important for us to work with local population, to slip in, and do everything we needed to do," said Hildreth. "I am equally proud of that as I am their reaction to the finished product."

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