

Out Cold: Brauer Productions Reels In Laughs With Latest Feature

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Anyone who thinks ice fishing is no more exciting than holding a stick over a hole in a frozen lake should think again. “Frozen Stupid,” a new feature written and directed by Rich Brauer, proves that there’s more to the subzero sport than the name implies.

The film centers on Tony Norgard (played by Joey Albright), who decides to fake being sick in order to avoid attending his mother-in-law’s birthday party and go ice fishing. While his plan works, it’s not without a series of hilarious and heartwarming misfortunes. Tony’s wife takes his truck, so Tony, who’s not exactly small, is forced to tool around town all day in a tiny Ford Probe. He meets up with his father, Frank (played by Ernest Borgnine), who is also playing hooky from the birthday party and the two spend the day fishing on the frozen lake. The entire film is riddled with mishaps, fishing gags and a slew of characters that Tony meets during his icy adventure.

“Frozen Stupid” was shot at Houghton Lake on Michigan’s Lower Peninsula, which is the state’s largest inland lake. Brauer says the idea for the film came from an actual ice fishing trip in Canada. “It was absolutely stinking freezing up there,” says Brauer. “I’m sitting out on the ice and it’s windy and it’s probably 20 below zero, and the ice on the little hole that we punched in the lake froze over in about 45 seconds, and it was just like, ‘Man, I am just frozen stupid out here.’”

The film was shot in 13 days and employed Brauer’s unusual method of production. “I do not beat up the crew or the cast,” says Brauer. “We start at eight and we’re done by five-thirty or so. Everyday. And that’s it. And we have weekends off. I completely have learned the lesson of beating up the crew for the sake of [the] film. There’s no point in that. We all have a life, we all are friends and I want them to all come back and work for me again.”

The casting was also done in a no doubt record-breaking amount of time: less than one hour. Brauer has worked with the cast members in the past and has established a relationship with them. He met many of them from actor Jeff Daniels’ Purple Rose Theater, and he has worked with Daniels on several films already, including “Escanaba in Da Moonlight” and “Supersucker.”

In keeping with his “don’t beat up the crew” repertoire, Brauer always has his cast run through rehearsals. That way, by the time shooting starts, the actors don’t need to do too many takes. “We’re going to quit shooting when we get the take,” Brauer says. “Many times we’ll only shoot one take of stuff. If the actor really nailed it and if it was really funny or if it hit the marks perfectly, why shoot it again?” This efficiency carries over into the editing room, since there’s only a few takes to choose from as opposed to the surplus garnered by traditional production methods.

For the actual shooting, Brauer used a Panasonic SDX900 camera, which he rented Fletcher Chicago. Although Brauer has acquired most of the production equipment he needs during his 29 years in business, he still rents camera equipment and says he’s grateful to Fletcher for always being there and for their strong support over the years.

Sound design was done at Brauer Productions (Traverse City, MI) and stock music was provided by FirstCom Music in Los Angeles, another company with whom Brauer has had a relationship for years. Though not a musician, Brauer says he has a good sense of what he’s looking for, and that FirstCom has always hit the mark. The film was edited to fit the music, and Brauer says, “At the end, you’d swear this movie was custom-scored.” Editing is being done by Jeff Morgan.

So who wants to get frozen stupid? Brauer says the film will be distributed worldwide and could be available through network television, cable, DVD and home video. Brauer says he shared the film’s synopsis with three distributors and luckily the biggest of the three decided to pick it up.

But the one aspect of production that Brauer is most passionate about is his desire to give back to the Houghton Lake community that helped his company so much during filming. “We had a big lunch [and] met with the tourism bureau, the chamber of commerce, the economic development people, the hotel/motel association and the mayor,” says Brauer. “Everybody showed up at this luncheon, and I basically said, ‘I really want to know if you guys want us in town. I’m not coming here unless you want us to be here.’ And they were just grinning ear to ear and they said, ‘Are you insane, man? You have to shoot it here!’”

At the end of the shoot, they had an auction to raise money for the town’s struggling school system. Items sold included autographed screenplays and pieces from the wardrobe, and Brauer says that the proceeds, all of which went to the schools, totaled roughly \$1,500. Brauer says he did this because he’s seen so many productions invade towns and step all over everybody. He wanted to give something back and to say thank you to Houghton Lake.