



Houghton Lake eager to embrace movie makers

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By KEITH GAVE

TRUE NORTH EDITOR

HOUGHTON LAKE - Rich Brauer balances precariously, crouching down, his feet perched on the skis of a vintage snowmobile as it moves not so slowly along the ice on Houghton Lake.

Some movie directors will do anything for the right shot, and this was an important one. Still, Brauer knew he was arm-wrestling fate when he took that little ride Friday with the wind at his back.

"If I fall off this thing," he told the driver, Chelsea actor Phil Powers, "please don't run over me. I've still got a few films left in me."

Perhaps, but all folks up here were concerned about was that Brauer and his film company have everything they could possibly need to produce this one - "Frozen Stupid" - a tall ice-fishing tale set around Tip-Up Town, the renowned winter festival.

The community, Brauer said, has bent over backwards to help ensure the film is a success, which organizers hope will help revive the 56-year-old festival as well as boost the lakeside resort that has fallen on hard times in recent years.

Brauer, 51, who wrote the screenplay and is directing and producing the film, said he created the script with Tip-Up Town in mind. He concluded he made the right choice during a visit to town in November when the community had just one word for him.

"Yes - they said yes to everything," Brauer said. "The people here, the entire community. ... They've been just wonderful to us.

"It's just a little move, but we're treating it like Gone With the Wind."

"Frozen Stupid" stars academy-award winner Ernest Borgnine, Michigan's Joey Albright and Kimberly Norris Guerrero. This is Borgnine's 188th film, his third with Brauer. All three worked with Brauer in his most recent film, Barn Red, filmed in Leland. Albright and Guerrero also appeared in Barn Red, and with Brauer in the movie Escanaba in da Moonlight, which featured Jeff Daniels.

Daniels, of Chelsea, and Brauer had collaborated on many productions, and Brauer said Frozen Stupid wouldn't be possible without Daniels' support. The cast has 16 characters, all but Borgnine and Guerrero are actors who appear regularly in Daniels' Purple Rose Theatre in Chelsea.

Brauer's relationship with Borgnine began with a simple note of introduction and invitation.

"He's such a heartfelt and straightforward guy," Borgnine said of Brauer. "He just wrote me a letter and said 'If you're willing to work with me in a nice little show, I could sure use you.' I said, 'What the heck.' And I'm glad I did. I've met some great people here working with Rich. It's a friendship at work."

And it's an ongoing love affair between Borgnine and his legion of fans in Michigan. He was the hit of last Saturday's Tip-Up Town parade, shaking hands and signing autographs during the entire 2 1/2-mile route.

"I had a wonderful time in that parade," said Borgnine, who turned 89 on Tuesday. "I've got to say, you've got some great people here in Michigan. I'd like to see a little more of this all over America. We could sure use it.

"People give you so much of your heart, you can't help but give your heart back to them."

And it was clear, too, that Borgnine still puts his heart into his work. He put in a full day Thursday, exchanging lines with Albright in a fish shanty. The temperature was a balmy 72 degrees, because the shanty was built on a set located on the fourth floor of the Comfort Suites Hotel.

It was there that Albright hooked the mother of all northern pike that continued to wrestle with him even after he pulled it from the fake lake.

Shooting was actually ahead of schedule, with filmmakers shooting through an average of eight pages a day - warp speed for the typical Hollywood production. Besides the lake, the hotel set and the Tip-Up Town Parade, several other venues around town were to be used in the film, including the Kilkarre Inn for bar scenes, the Maple Valley Restaurant and the home of TUT co-chair Denise MacKenzie.

But Friday was spent all outdoors on a sunny, 40-degree day, and shooting involved about three-dozen extras, most of them from around town or the local college.

Among them were Jeanne Harris, from Mesquite, Texas, who was vacationing in Tip-Up Town. She and companion Rick McDonald, of Houghton Lake, met through the Internet a few months ago and, thanks to a friend of McDonald's who's working on the set they found themselves among a crowd cheering a snowmobile race.

So what did they think of their first moviemaking experience?

"Well, there are a lot of delays," Harris said. "You sit around a lot. But hey, what else is there to do on a Friday morning in Houghton Lake? It's too early to drink."

Among Brauer's production crew was William Harris, of Rochester Hills, a theater arts student at Kirtland Community College, who got a gig as the sound man. He's cutting classes for some real experience.

Harris said he got a one-day crash course in running the field equipment and went to work.

So what will he think when the movie is made and his name appears when the credits roll?

"It'll be really cool," he said.

Actually, it'll be Frozen Stupid.

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Viva Italia

HOUGHTON LAKE - Among the locals playing a prominent role in the movie Frozen Stupid being filmed during Tip-Up Town is Gordon Cabay of Houghton Lake, who bears a strong resemblance to Ermes Effron Borgnino - otherwise known to generations of movie fans as Ernest Borgnine.

Cabay won a look-alike contest, earning him a part in the film as a stunt double, shot during a night scene when Borgnine, the film's star, is unavailable.

Borgnine was to leave Houghton Lake for Italy and the premier of his most recent movie "La cura del gorilla." - The Cure of the Gorilla. He did the entire movie in his native Italian.

"My mother and dad both spoke it, and I never forgot it," Borgnine said in an interview Friday. "When I was a child, my mother took me to Italy and I really learned the language there.

"It was interesting, because when I was making the picture, people kept asking me why I spoke Italian better than they did."

- Keith Gave

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