

‘Flight of the Heron’: Local filmmakers slated for Sacramento festival

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A trio of artists with Crescent City backgrounds have made a short film highlighting the U.S. anti-Asian immigration policy of the late 1800s. That film now is in the post-production process and scheduled to debut at a Sacramento film festival this fall.

Cable public access TV station Access Sacramento selected “Flight of the Heron” as one of the 10 films to premier Oct. 5 during the 20th-annual “A Place Called Sacramento” film festival at the Crest Theater in Sacramento.

More than 300 scripts were submitted as part of the selection process.

“Flight of the Heron” centers on the 1875 Page Act, which effectively banned the entry of Chinese women into the U.S. In 1882, Chinese men were banned through legislation as well.

“Flight of the Heron” is a project of Circle B Productions. The company was formed by Todd Bull and Olivia Reedy, who became friends through Del Norte High School drama classes, community theatre and other local activities.

Although their paths diverged after graduation, they remained friends, teaming up decades later to chase their movie-making dreams.

Todd’s father, Nate Bull, was a past editor of The Triplicate. Reedy’s mother also worked for the newspaper.

Circle B draws its name from a Bull family ranch, while also combining the “O” in Olivia with the “B” in Bull. It’s a nod to the collaborative process the pair enjoy, as well as their shared history.

“Flight of the Heron” will be their first complete film, although they have several projects underway.

Another Crescent City native and friend of Bull and Reedy, Matt Hildebrandt performed as an acting extra in “Flight of the Heron.” He appears with Bill Raymond, Olivia’s father and an accomplished theatre actor with 75 film credits, including appearances in “Eight Men Out,” “12 Monkeys” and “Lincoln,” among others.

Raymond also appeared on numerous TV programs, among them “The Wire,” “Miami Vice” and “Law & Order.”

Yet another Del Norte High School alum, professional musician Ashley Slater, composed the film’s music.

Bull said Raymond’s presence on the set was influential, adding that the hopeful young actors gleaned as much stagecraft as possible from the old hand, who has worked with top Hollywood names. Raymond plays a smuggler who’s defying the Page Act by bringing Chinese women into the country illegally.

Hildebrandt met Bull and Reedy through music, theatre and speech at Del Norte High School. He recently retired from the City of Crescent City after 32 years of service and has been ticking off items on his bucket list.

He said he’s done a little local TV, a little radio and a fair amount of theatre, but he’d never had the opportunity for film work. When he saw social media posts recruiting for “Flight of the Heron,” he jumped at the chance.

Hildebrandt said he’s remained active in music, but hadn’t done any acting for a decade. Being a performer before live audiences is different from film work, he said, in that you’re playing to a much smaller audience. But never having enjoyed big crowds, Hildebrandt said, he was able to drill right in and focus.

You might recognize Hildebrandt in his scene if you’ve ever been to the city’s pool. He was in management there for the past 20 years and taught swimming lessons for kids, among his other duties. He said it was the best job in town.

Only briefly retired and now working in sporting goods, he's looking at more acting opportunities. The self-admitted Disney fanatic said he might try to land a gig at Disneyland just for kicks.

"Because this was such an amazing experience, I would totally be open to other film projects in the future," Hildebrandt said.

Bull is a producer, with more than 50 titles under his belt as a performer and director.

He earned a bachelor of arts degree from San Diego State University and has written numerous scripts with Reedy, such as "Fawn's Justice," which follows a Tolowa Indian FBI agent through Del Norte County; "Singlewide Pride," a crime drama about a pot heist and real estate fraud; and "The War of Wills," a Civil War period piece.

Bull and Reedy now have written two short films together, "Flight of the Heron" and "The Lifelong Gift."

Reedy is a director and published author with more than 100 book and audio titles in her credits. And she's a former sound engineer, who's also done more than two decades of voice-over acting work.

Reedy's currently editing "Flight of the Heron."

"I always knew she was a brilliant writer," Bull said, adding that having a female writing partner had given more realism in the storytelling.

Reedy initially was a bit reluctant to try script writing. It's a complicated form of composition and she was totally unfamiliar with the format and approach. But after reading one of Bull's screenplays, she was hooked. He helped her learn techniques and style for screenwriting, and once she was into it, the magic began.

They've had a synergistic chemistry from the beginning. "I'll put something out there and he'll really latch on and add to it, and then I'll add on to that," Reedy said. "It takes our material to a whole other place that we wouldn't get to alone."

The short film's creators said that during auditions, a number of the actors expressed a desire to be part of a film that reveals a sordid chapter in America's history. Their passion reportedly prompted the filmmakers to pursue additional funding and find ways to include them all.

The film was shot in Sacramento and also in Locke, or the Locke Historic District, an unincorporated delta community built by Chinese immigrants in the early 1900s. The town originally was named Lockeport after George Locke, who owned the land that the town was built upon at a time when Chinese people were not allowed to own land.

The crew spent two 12-hour days in Locke. It took about 36 hours of filming to get enough material for them to work with.

Portrayed in the film as early Sacramento, Locke was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971 and designated a National Historic Landmark District in 1990, as a representation of historic Chinese-American rural communities.

So far, “Flight of the Heron” has cost about \$22,000 to make and there’s still work to be done. Principal shooting was wrapped, but post-production remains underway. Rather than wait for a crew from Access Sacramento, a team of about 50 actors and production crew was assembled ... out of Bull and Reedy’s pockets.

The original script called for just four characters, but the crew grew as more people became interested in the telling the story. The budget grew as well, swelling from a \$5,000 plan as more equipment and people were necessary. Fortunately, the equipment was an investment that could be used for future projects.

Reedy said she knew from day one the film had to be made, because it takes on a much-overlooked, dark part of American history. She said the Page Act was an injustice that needed to be addressed, a feeling that was shared by the throng of actors and crew members who volunteered for “Flight of the Heron.”

Reedy said her upbringing, with an actor father and writer mother, and her early career prepared her for this must-make movie. She said people came out of the woodwork asking to be part of the poignant story.

Bull noted that before the advent of digital techniques, it would have been far too costly to make the film — maybe up to \$120,000. What’s more, there may not have been an audience for the work. But thanks to online content providers such as Netflix and Hulu, there is a hunger for a wider range of material, he said.

“Flight of the Heron” begins in a hospital room, with a dying woman whose long-lost love has reappeared with the ability to time travel. They emerge in 1875 and are confronted by the anti-Asian sentiment and laws that had affected the woman’s ancestors, whose legacy will benefit many lives.

It’s an important theme at time when the benefits and risks of immigration are being debated internationally. Bull said it’s possible the film could go further still, noting the heavy investments in moviemaking coming out of China. He said the Chinese are looking for positive scripts that would do well in that nation as well as America.

A 10-minute version of “Flight of the Heron” is due back to Access Sacramento by Sept 3. Bull and Reedy will be interviewed on Access Sacramento on Sept. 4.

A longer version, 15-17 minutes, is expected for future festivals. Hildebrandt said he hopes there will be a way to arrange a screening of the film here.