

THE HEALER TOUCHES LUNENBURG

A Q&A with four of the people behind The Healer, a film shot in—and about—Lunenburg

It's not often that a film comes along with a touch of whimsy and a dash of magic; a Capra-esque inspired family film that carries a resounding message beneath its subtext. "The Healer" is just that. Spanish director Paco Arango knew he wanted to shoot the feature film in Nova Scotia because he needed a place that was "desolate, wonderful and beautiful". What better way to capture that essence than by bringing onboard top-notch Spanish cinematographer Javier Aguirresarobe, who has worked on numerous feature films like the "Twilight" saga and "Vicky Cristina Barcelona". Throw in a stellar lead cast of actor Jonathan Pryce ("Game of Thrones"), Oliver Jackson Cohen ("Dracula" TV series) and Camilla Luddington ("Greys Anatomy"), complimented by local actors & crew, and you have the makings of The Healer.

It's a story of a disgruntled young man in England named Alec, with a major gambling debt and a repair shop that he can no longer sustain. A mysterious uncle he has never known shows up offering to absolve his debt on one condition: that he moves to the small bucolic town of Lunenburg for one year. With much trepidation he makes the move and uncanny events begin to occur as people in the town seem to recover from their afflictions while he is there. In time Alec is confronted with the notion that he bears a "family secret" past down from generations. Local Connections Halifax sits down with the creative individuals behind the movie.

Q&A by: Tiffany Thornton

Q: WHAT WAS THE INITIAL IMPETUS BEHIND THE FILM THE HEALER? WAS IT SOMETHING YOU HAD BEEN WORKING ON FOR A WHILE WITH DIRECTOR PACO ARANGO?

Producer Enrique Posner: We had been looking to do another film, and it was a film that requires a large famous cast and we were having difficulties assembling everybody at the same time and getting everyone's schedules to work. Paco got frustrated and he said, "I am going to go off and write something and see what we can do with this other film." He came out to Nova Scotia about a year ago with an idea in his head, looked around, started to think and then this idea for The Healer came to him. He wrote the script in a month and of course refined it and refined it, but we decided almost exactly a year ago that we would come and shoot it here. We had financiers that were ready to finance.

Q: YOU COLLABORATED WITH LOCAL PRODUCER MICHAEL VOLPE, HOW DID THAT COME TO BE?

EP: Paco and I decided we would make this film, and that Nova Scotia would be the place. We needed a partner here that was very knowledgeable with the ways of working with the crews, etc. That is why we invited Nova Scotian producer Michael Volpe to join us.

Q: WHAT'S YOUR SENSE OF NOVA SCOTIA AND HOW IT FITS INTO THE FILM?

EP: We are telling a story about Lunenburg. The Lunenburg that we are describing is a bit of an idealized version, because one of the main characters, Alec, played by Oliver Jackson Cohen, comes under duress. He not interested in being here, when he is here he learns that the town is expecting him. It's all very strange, almost reminiscent of a Frank Capra movie. It's so perfect and beautiful and that adds to his frustration because he just does not want to be in the town or have anything to do with the people. Then when they tell him he is a healer and can help them he wants it even less. For us it was wonderful to be able to photograph Lunenburg in its true beauty, which was magical. It will be a most beautiful postcard to the area. The director of cinematography Javier Aguirresarobe is a genius. In the film we are taking Lunenburg and distilling it into its essence.

Q: YOU SPENT SOME TIME SCOUTING LOCATIONS HERE ABOUT A YEAR AGO? WHY HERE WHEN YOU WERE LIVING IN SPAIN? WHAT WAS THE DRAW?

Director Paco Arango: I was between movies and I had The Healer written. I came out to Nova Scotia about a year ago,



June 2014. The taxes were one of the main reasons and we were working with Canadian partners. I needed a place that was desolate, wonderful and beautiful. I came to see it and it was great because I had actually written the scene for what I was looking at. I got really lucky while here I met a guy named Shawn Clark who is a Nova Scotian location scout. He is also in the film.

Q: AS FAR AS THE EVOLUTION OF THE CHARACTERS, DID YOU ALREADY HAVE IT IN YOUR MIND OF WHO WAS GOING TO BE IN THE FILM?

PA: Yes I did. The great thing is I knew that I was going to be using a lot of Nova Scotian actors. I knew my four leads would have to come from abroad. I spent a year casting people.

Q: THERE IS A REAL PHILANTHROPIC ANGLE TO THE FILM. CAN YOU TELL ME A BIT MORE ABOUT IT?

PA: In 2000 I started volunteering in the children's ward in Spain and it took over my life. It was once a week to everyday. In 2005 I founded my own foundation called Aladina. We now tend to 2000 children at their bedside every year. With my last film, "Maktub", I built Europe's most sophisticated bone marrow transplant centre for children. We have done 200 transplants in two years; my dedication to these kids is absolute. I was fortunate enough to meet Paul Newman and I was made a member of his board. I decided that this movie was going to help his "Serious Fun" camps. We have pledged a minimum of half a million dollars. We intend to make this a big thing.

Q: HOW DID YOUR ROLE AS THE MYSTERIOUS UNCLE RAYMOND COME INTO FRUITION?

Actor Jonathan Pryce: It was the first time I had ever met Paco. They literally just sent me the script and I read it and I had to read it again as I didn't get it the first time. Often with a script if

it comes cold and there is no background to it you don't know what kind of film it might be. This was a bit different than what normally comes through the letterbox. I really recognized more of the humour that's in there, trying to find the heart of the film. I liked it; at times it's witty and it has a good heart.

Q: HAD YOU SPENT TIME IN THIS PART OF CANADA BEFORE?

JP: No, it's one of the reasons I wanted to do this film - when would I go to Nova Scotia otherwise? And I knew about the fish. I liked the script, and when I choose films all the different factors come into play. If the location is good and it's somewhere I have never been before then I'll want to do it.

Q: HAD YOU INTERVIEWED FOR THIS ROLE OF ALEC IN THE HEALER FROM THE ONSET?

Actor Oliver Jackson Cohen: No, I just got a phone call, I don't know why but here I am!

Q: YOUR CHARACTER IS IN DEBT, DOWN AND OUT WITH A GAMBLING BACKGROUND. IS THIS ROLE A DEPARTURE FROM OTHER ROLES?

OJC: Yeah, this film is really light hearted; a warm film with little drama. Alec is a selfish man and so it's interesting that he moves somewhere, wants nothing to do with all of the nonsense. He had lost his brother to cancer and then he meets this young girl in the film with cancer. She becomes the catalyst for him and starts to promote change in him.

Q: WHAT RESONATED FOR YOU FILMING HERE IN NOVA SCOTIA AS PART OF THE ROLE?

OJC: It's certainly beautiful here. We filmed in an isolated house in Aspotogan. I think it's helpful in that respect to feel a bit like you're out of your element and it can fit into your character.