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Moe: New film portrays notorious Madison killing

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February 23, 2009

The lineup of movies for the Wisconsin Film Festival will be announced next week, but here's a sneak preview: "Winter of Frozen Dreams," a noir thriller based on one of Madison's most notorious murder cases, will play during the festival's April 2-5 run.

Festival director Meg Hamel confirmed Friday that the film, adapted from Madison writer Karl Harter's 1990 book of the same name, was accepted into the festival in the "Wisconsin's Own" category.

A jury of three film professionals pick the films in that category, Hamel said.

She also noted that while the festival routinely showcases documentaries, "Winter of Frozen Dreams" may be the festival's first fictional film based on real Madison events.

For some of us it's hard to grasp that next year it will be 30 years since Barbara Hoffman, a brilliant UW-Madison chemistry student who played the violin and spoke six languages, was convicted of murdering a man she met while working as a "masseuse" in a West Side "health studio."

Hoffman seduced Harry Berge into listing her as the beneficiary on his life insurance policy, and then gave him a fatal dose of cyanide. She was acquitted of the murder of Gerald Davies, another massage parlor client, who had helped her try to cover up the first murder.

It has been 20 years since Harter's book, which was suggested by his friend Jim Doyle. Harter used to play pick-up basketball with Doyle and today the two can occasionally be found playing golf at Odana.

Doyle, now governor, was the district attorney in Dane County while the Hoffman drama was playing out and he told Harter it was the most fascinating case his office ever prosecuted.

Jackie Mitchard, pre-Oprah, thought about writing a book on the case, but Harter beat her to it, and there was movie interest almost from the start. ABC optioned it first for a movie of the week. That option ran out and as the years passed so did others, to the point where it looked like there might never be a film.

Finally, in the late 1990s, Michael Graf, a Madison producer of high-end television commercials, optioned the book and co-authored a screenplay that framed the case as a noir love story between Hoffman and Davies. The script excited nearly everyone who read it, including the actor

James Woods, who agreed to play Charlie Lulling, the lead Madison police detective on the case.

A New York production company opened a Madison office and began pre-production on the film in February 2006. Joel DeSpain and I were going to play reporters in the film, which, in hindsight, might have doomed it.

In any case, for reasons never articulated but almost surely connected to money, the production shut down before any film was shot.

A year later, "Winter of Frozen Dreams" began filming in Schenectady, N.Y. The cast was intriguing: with Thora Birch, from "American Beauty," playing Hoffman and Keith Carradine ("Nashville," "Deadwood") playing Lulling, the cop.

But after filming was completed in early 2007, the movie seemed to disappear. There was Internet speculation that it might never be released. Then, last October, a California company, Artist View Entertainment, acquired the film with the intent to sell it for either theatrical or DVD release.

The following month, Monterey Media, also based in California, acquired the film and has set May 5 as the date for its release on DVD.

A date, time and location for the Wisconsin Film Festival's showing of "Winter of Frozen Dreams" is not yet set. The full festival lineup will be announced March 5. Tickets may be purchased, online and at the Memorial Union, beginning March 7.

It would be better if "Winter" had been made in Madison, but nevertheless, I'm sure it will sell out at the festival. I wonder if any of the real life figures from the case will attend?

Prosecutor John Burr is retired but still around. Donald Eisenberg, Hoffman's attorney, lives in Florida, though his sons have a successful law practice together here. Charlie Lulling died in 2000. The presiding judge, Mike Torphy, died last November.

The Packers' defensive line couldn't keep Karl Harter from attending.

As for Barbara Hoffman, she remains incarcerated in the women's prison at Taycheedah. In 30 years she has never talked publicly about the case.

[Return to story](#)