

Schenectady gets a close up in 'Winter of Frozen Dreams'

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First published: Friday, March 27, 2009

It's debatable whether the residents of Schenectady should feel flattered to have had their city chosen as the backdrop for "Winter of Frozen Dreams." The film, while riveting in its drama, is purposefully stark and dreary, set in the dead of winter in the late 1970s, small town Wisconsin.

The city is practically a character in the movie. And it is not a protagonist.

The movie tells the true story of Barbara Hoffman, a University of Wisconsin dropout and prostitute, who was charged with the murder of two men, both of whom had named her as beneficiary to their life insurance policies. Police discovered that she had been living a double life, seducing her clients into thinking she planned to marry them. Hoffman and another man (who later ended up dead himself) buried the body of one of her paramours in the snow, with only his blue toes visible to the world.

At the time of Hoffman's 1980 trial, the murder case was a national sensation and became the first televised murder trial.

"Winter of Frozen Dreams" stars Thora Birch of "American Beauty" as Hoffman and Keith Carradine of "Deadwood" and "Dexter" fame as the detective looking to solve one last case before he retires.

In the midst of this true story of sex, money and murder are all the familiar Schenectady landmarks. There's Mike's First Prize, the grand staircase of Schenectady City Hall and an aerial view of downtown. There are also lesser recognizable spots, such as the Scotia Police Department, the Maple Ski Ridge and several private houses in Schenectady County. While the scenery appears stylistic and retro in the film, it is the typical now-tro of the city.

Local historian Don Rittner helped bring the film crew to Schenectady, along with Nick Barber and their newly formed Schenectady Film Alliance.

"We thought this was a great place to bring movies," said Rittner. "We have a 400-year-old movie set. We have every set we would need for any kind of movie."

Producers Millie and Milka Stanisic are based out of New York City, so it was easier for them to stay closer to home. Also, Madison itself has been built up since the 1970s, so it would have been impossible to shoot the film there.

"It could have been a small town anywhere," said Millie Stanisic. "We took a trip up there and thought that this place was going to look great on camera."

Rittner and Barber worked with the producers to bring in extras, arrange shoot locations and borrow period automobiles. To show their gratitude, the filmmakers gave both Rittner and Barber roles in the film. They play police officers escorting Hoffman up the city hall stairs to hear her fate in court. Other well-known locals who appear in the movie include car salesman Ken Goewey, Schenectady Police Officer Peter Frisoni and filmmaker Cliff Stoodley.

Rittner, who has also had bit parts in the films "Ironweed" and "The Age of Innocence," is now trying to arrange a public showing of the film at Proctors.

The movie's television premier will be on April 3 on the Lifetime Movie Network. It will also screen at the Wisconsin Film Festival and at the Bare Bones Film Festival in Muskogee, Okla. The film will also be available on DVD in May.

Birch said the cast and crew arrived in Schenectady in the winter of 2007 feeling mixed emotions.

"It was freezing cold and no one was really that thrilled to be there," said the 27-year-old actress. "There's a definite mood there. But that's what made Schenectady great as filler. As soon as we got there, I thought 'this is going to be great.'"

Birch also felt challenged in her role as Hoffman, a stoic yet complex woman filled with secrets.

"I take parts that I feel will be a struggle, almost to the point that I'm in over my head. That gets me excited," said Birch. "The one thing I had to go on was her privacy, her lack of explaining herself. She was analyzing everyone's behavior and she should have been analyzing her own."

While the documented events — and the real life verdicts — indicated that Hoffman was certainly not blameless in the events, the producers wanted to keep the audience mulling over what really happened.

"We decided not to necessarily find her guilty in the film," said Milka Stanisic. "Besides her and the two men who died, no one really knows what happened."

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See the film

To purchase "Winter of Frozen Dreams" on DVD, visit <http://www.montereymedia.com>, where it is for sale for \$26.95

The film will show on the Lifetime Movie Channel at 8 p.m. Friday, April 3.