

Super scary 'Shelter' wrapping up here today

May 13, 2008 12:00 am

By Barbara Vancheri / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Leave it to the Swedes.

Bjorn Stein and Mans Marlind have found a civilized, common-sense way to make a movie: by co-directing it. They flip a coin to see who gets the first day and take turns from there.

They do all the pre-production and post-production together, but each directs every other day and serves as "best buddy" on the off days. That is how they've been making "Shelter," with Julianne Moore as a psychiatrist and Jonathan Rhys Meyers as a patient, in Pittsburgh.

The movie, also starring Jeffrey DeMunn, Frances Conroy, Nate Corddry and 9-year-old Brooklynn Proulx, is scheduled to finish shooting today outside Pittsburgh.

NALA Films, which financed and produced "In the Valley of Elah," starring Oscar nominee Tommy Lee Jones, is making the movie, budgeted at \$20 million to \$25 million. It's too soon to say when "Shelter" could land in theaters because it doesn't have a distributor, but producers are hoping for early next year.

"It's just such a perfect city to shoot our film in," said Darlene Caamano Loquet, president of production/producer of NALA Films. "It was set here, and we're getting everything we need, and the crew's amazing. We're having a great time, and the film looks great."

Now that production is almost over and co-director Stein has a handle on how it's turning out, he calls it a "very intense, super-scary thriller" or a "drama that happens to be a horror movie."

Details of the movie, written by Michael Cooney ("Identity"), are being kept under wraps, but this much is known: Moore plays psychiatrist Dr. Cara Jessup, who has made a career out of defying the notion of multiple personality disorders and providing such convincing courtroom testimony that many defendants have been sentenced to death.

Jessup is devoted to science but never lost faith in God, even after her husband was murdered. Her young daughter (Proulx) is a non-believer.

After a particularly troubling court case, Jessup's psychiatrist father (DeMunn) introduces her to his new patient (Rhys Meyers). As Jessup explores his past, she starts to question her beliefs in science and God and finds her family in danger.

"Shelter" is wrapping at a propitious time as another Moore movie, Fernando Meirelles' "Blindness," is

about to open the Cannes Film Festival and Rhys Meyers is making Showtime subscribers swoon over his King Henry VIII on "The Tudors."

Stein, whose knowledge of Pittsburgh before coming here had been limited to such movies as "Flashdance," "Night of the Living Dead" and "The Deer Hunter," got to know the region while scouting and shooting.

"For me, as a Swede, it's how America looks for me. It's very beautiful, and from what I gather so far, of all the cities I've been in, it has more texture to it than most other cities, I think, which is very, very beautiful.

"We fall in love with everything here, from old ads painted on walls and stuff like that, we find that immensely beautiful," alongside photogenic bridges, mountains and forests.

Stein is 38 and Marlind 39, and they've been friends for 28 years. Both natives of Sweden, they met as boys during summer vacation when their parents hatched a scheme they would imitate.

"I went to this little tennis school; he was there also. Our parents just looked at each other and said, 'Can you drive our kid every second day so we don't have to drive him every day?' So we got to sit in the same car, and then we became friends."

They soaked up the same movies at a little cinema, and Stein recalled, in accented English, "That's where the interest was born. We've been at it ever since."

Veterans of Swedish television, commercials and an award-winning film called "Storm," they are making their American debut with "Shelter."

As for the co-directing arrangement, Stein says, "It's a very strange setup everyone seems to think, but it works fantastically. ...

"If I win [the coin toss] and I start to direct, Mans is my 'best buddy' as we call him. He sits next to me, he doesn't have any responsibility, he doesn't have to run the show at all like I do, but he runs me, kind of. He helps me a lot."

The "best buddy" might spot something amiss in the background, suggest it's time to move on -- you've got the shot -- or to try another take.

It's a bonus to have another person on the set with the exact same agenda. "It's very demanding to shoot a movie. You get tired, and by doing this every second day, you get to recharge more than usual. That's a blessing in disguise."

Caamano Loquet says "Shelter" had a pretty streamlined schedule, so the best buddy system worked well, especially with Swedish director of photography Linus Sandgren added to the mix.

"They've worked together, so the guys have a brilliant shorthand. They think as one, and they are such a great team. ... It's exciting to see them work, these three guys totally in sync."

On one recent day, Stein was best buddy, which allowed him to chat in the catering tent as a generous buffet was being readied for cast and crew, while Marlind was inside a makeshift soundstage with Moore, Rhys Meyers and DeMunn.

They were filming an intense, key scene at the beginning of the movie, which takes place inside what everyone cagily calls an "institution."

The actors were working on a set that included a staidly decorated office and an attached observation room. DeMunn's character was attempting to videotape the changeover in his patient from one personality to another.

Moore, who was at the top of the directors' wish list, was targeted "because she's the best female actress on the planet. She's also a mother like the character, and she comes across as very smart ... both as a person and usually the role she's playing," Stein said.

The directors were drawn to Rhys Meyers' talent as well as his interesting face, including "those eyes that pierce right through you" and his ability to handle dialects. This movie will allow audiences to see him in yet another way, Stein says.

The Pittsburgh backdrop for "Shelter" made it the first place the producers considered, although they thought about going to Canada. The state's tax incentive for filmmakers "made the decision a no-brainer," Caamano Loquet said.

When location manager Peter Martorano, working with the Pittsburgh Film Office, did a preliminary scout, he introduced the filmmakers to "the most fabulous locations you could possibly imagine," he said. Among them were McConnell's Mills State Park, Avella in Washington County, Collier and the Panhandle Trail.

He ultimately assembled a long list of locations that also included Downtown and its bridges, the Fort Pitt Tunnel, East Liberty Presbyterian Church, Jones Hall at Community College of Allegheny County, Ritter's Diner near Shadyside, Spin Bartini & Ultra Lounge in Shadyside, various locations in Braddock including the Carnegie Library and home of Mayor John Fetterman, a residence in the city's Schenley Farms neighborhood and the Collier maintenance yard.

"Being from Los Angeles and spending most of my career -- I've been doing this 18 years -- doing a fair amount of projects in the Rust Belt, Pittsburghers and people in Pennsylvania and everywhere we went made it so wonderful for us. Just made things really easy," said Martorano, who considers Cleveland his base.

"They talk about when 'Wonder Boys' shot here, what a fantastic job and you knew it was Pittsburgh. You're going to see it, and people are going to be really, really excited and proud to see their city. It's such a great little movie."

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First Published May 13, 2008 12:00 am