

Debut film explores impact of violence on peaceful values

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GOSHEN, Ind. — A new feature by a Mennonite filmmaker explores the tough realities of violence and pacifism.

In 28-year-old writer-director Sidney King's debut, *Pearl Diver*, King offers a colorful, complex look at how human responses to violence can threaten even the closest relationships.

King tells the story of Hannah Eberly, played by Joey Honsa, and Marian Miller, played by Amy Jean Johnson, who, as children, witnessed an unimaginable horror that ended with the murder of their mother.

Twenty years later, as Hannah pursues a writing career in Chicago and Marian's world revolves around her family and the Mennonite farming community where they grew up, the memories and secrets they hold from that night continue to haunt and change them.

King, who is completing a master's degree in folklore at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, became interested in filmmaking during high school and college as he came to enjoy watching different genres. He graduated from Goshen College in 2000 with degrees in music and German.

"I started writing a novel in college, but I got 100 pages into it and realized that I was writing a screenplay – scene by scene and visualizing it as a movie," King said. He started writing the screenplay for *Pearl Diver* two and a half years ago.

The film may have special meaning for Mennonites with references to Dirk Willems, Russian Mennonite refugees and the values of mutual aid, privacy and community.

"I think a lot of Mennonites will see it and recognize the themes," said King.

Though a lot of non-Mennonites may not fully understand some of the specific cultural and religious values, King said, "I am shooting for a broad audience. The word 'Mennonite' is only in it once. I really tried hard to make it coherent and understandable to a non-Mennonite audience."

As he made plans to film *Pearl Diver* in Goshen during 17 days last summer, King coincidentally benefited from the making of another film, *Lonesome Jim*, in the small town, directed by Steve Buscemi, with actors Liv Tyler and Casey Affleck.

Able to join the crew on short notice, King got a close look at how a professional film set operates and how experienced actors and directors work together.

“I saw that it is a lot of work and a lot of organization, but there is nothing mystical about it,” King said. “You just have to plan for it and do hard work.”

King assembled a cast and crew from around the country, mixing newcomers with more established figures such as Yevgeni Lazarev, a prominent Russian film and theater actor.

Most of the crew, including some high schoolers, had never worked on a film set before, “but they did a great job and worked so hard,” King said.

With a 20- to 30-member crew and a low budget, King relied on the generosity and creativity of friends. The set designers fully furnished a house for \$37. Also to save money, they used leftover scrap film, or “short ends,” of 180-foot rolls from other productions. In total, they used 50,000 feet of film during the 17 days.

According to King, most studio films shoot on 1,000-foot rolls, and it’s not uncommon for them to shoot in total over a million feet of film.

Even if the crew scrimped on production materials, *Pearl Diver* doesn’t shortchange the issues it addresses.

As the film opens, one sister is advocating for the release of her mother’s murderer from prison and the other sister is arguing against it, requiring them both to examine what forgiveness and sacrificial love means.

Then, Marian’s daughter (Maddie Abshire) is in a farm equipment accident and Hannah comes to help, only to have their worlds further collide. Marian can’t understand why Hannah wants to keep reliving the night of their mother’s murder, even writing about it for others to read, and Hannah can’t comprehend why Marian is willing to sacrifice everything she has to stand by her cultural and religious values.

As a Mennonite and pacifist himself, King said: “I was interested in the tradition of nonviolence and how tenable it is in the contemporary world. [The characters] are all struggling with how much of themselves to give up for another.”

King juxtaposes sisters with contrasting world views: One wears a head covering, and the other enjoys a drink at the bar.

“In the end, hopefully, the audience will see the value of both of them as they watch the characters grow and even change each other,” King said.

King helped write and direct the film *Shroud for a Journey: The Clayton Kratz Story*, the story of four Mennonite college students who retraced the steps of Kratz in 1920 as he took part in Mennonite Central Committee’s effort to deliver aid to the Russian Mennonites, only to disappear forever in the Ukraine.

King plans to take *Pearl Diver* to film festivals, starting with the East Lansing (Mich.) Film Festival and the Indianapolis International Film Festival in April. He hopes to attract the attention necessary to get a distributor for the film.

The film’s Web site is www.pearldivermovie.com.