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Maine's Close-Up

Far from the Hollywood hills, innovative directors are casting our state in the spotlight. Discover the **Maine movies** coming to a screen near you.

BY SARAH MOORE



ISLAND ZERO

What: A remote Maine island community finds itself suddenly cut off from world. When people start to vanish, the terrified survivors realize that someone—or something—is hunting them.

When: May 15

Where: Over 15 locations, including Camden, Rockport, Lincolnville

Who: Laila Robins (*Homeland*); Adam Wade McLaughlin (*Billions*); Teri Reeves (*Once Upon A Time*); Elaine Landry

THE WITCH FILES

IN 2014, THE STREETS of Portland crawled with the staggering bodies of the undead.

This year, the skies overhead will spark with spells and curses. Kyle Rankin, director of the Portland-based comedy/horror movie *Night of the Living Deb*, returns with more otherworldly antics in *The Witch Files*. “It’s based around a group of misfit high school girls who meet in detention,” he says. “One of them has certain magical skills, and she leads the others to an island [Mackworth], where they perform a ritual and form a coven.” A world of possibility seemingly opens



THE WITCH FILES

What: A group of misfit teenage girls form a powerful coven.

When: Release pending (stay tuned for Halloween 2018)

Where: Portland; Mackworth Island; Bath

Who: Paget Brewster (*Friends*); Holly Tayler; Greg Finley

up to the newly minted witches, but, inevitably, there's a darker side to the magical allegiance. The movie trailer propels us through familiar haunts, from Exchange Street to Miss Portland Diner, as the spells turn to curses and storm clouds gather. "I was watching *Chronicle* one day, and it was all these dudes discovering superpowers—I just wasn't that interested," says Rankin. "I feel like magic and witchcraft have a particularly feminine energy."



Rankin lives in LA, where he's currently working on an action movie. *Night of the Living Deb* and *The Witch Files* are self-confessed "passion projects" for the director, who hails from York. "I very selfishly wanted a reason to come back. I spend my time eating and drinking coffee around town. I like to keep an eye on the pool of creativity in Maine and hire local cast and crew for these movies where I can." Movie-making is a strikingly different experience in this corner of the country. "Both films were incredibly low budget, around \$250,000 each," Rankin says. "No

one in Los Angeles can believe it's possible to make a movie on that amount. But everyone's so accommodating here. The mayor and the sheriff both came to greet me while we shot *The Witch Files* in Bath. People lined up to offer filming locations for free. We were made to feel very welcome."

ISLAND ZERO

If the Coppolas and Coens have taught us anything, it's that filmmaking is a family business. That being said, the partnership between best selling medical-thriller novelist Tess Gerritsen (of *Rizzoli & Isles* fame) and her photographer/farmer son Josh Gerritsen may surprise viewers—the pair have produced a horror movie that will set your skin crawling. "[Tess] approached me about the idea out of the blue," Josh, the movie's director, says. "We were weeding my garden in 2014 when she turned to me and said, 'How would you like to make a horror movie in Maine?' Tess grew up watching horror films. I enjoy how horror allows you to explore some of humanity's darker sides through the lens of something fantastical."

Island Zero transports us to small island community that finds itself inexplicably cut off from the rest of the world. Soon after, a shapeless 'something' begins to hunt the island's inhabitants one-by-one. "Tess came up with the idea by asking herself, 'What if you lived on an island and the ferry never came back?'" says Josh. "She worked backwards from there and filled out the story with characters who would fight to the ends of the earth to bring their loved ones to safety." The movie taps into a gnawing anxiety

familiar to anyone who's lived beyond the easy grasp of civilization. Like the snow-bound Overlook Hotel in *The Shining*, the film's surroundings force the tension inward onto the island and its inhabitants as the dread and body count rise. First-time feature director Josh found inspiration from Ridley Scott's 1979 classic *Alien* for the lurking hunter. "Scott keeps the tension going through the entire film, while only showing the alien a handful of times. In our film, you do end up seeing...something at the end."

Josh, who lives in Lincolnville, and Tess, a long-time Camden resident, were set on making *Island Zero* here in Maine, despite its challenges. "One of the biggest difficulties we faced was dealing with the freezing temperatures," Josh says. "One actor had to pretend she was a corpse outside at night. She said she could literally feel her eyeballs starting to freeze! But we always knew we wanted to set the film here because there's so much atmosphere. There's a sense of foreboding that permeates our surroundings. Beauty can quickly turn to danger, and that's what makes Maine so unique. And so perfect for horror."

COMING OF AGE IN MAINELAND

What: *Maineland* is a multi-layered documentary that follows teenagers of China's wealthy elite as they attend Fryeburg Academy.

When: In theaters. Planned Amazon release June/July 2018.

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CINEMA



Director Miao Wang had just released *Beijing Taxi*, her first documentary film, and was hunting for her next juicy project when she arrived at Fryeburg Academy in April 2011. “I was immediately struck by the number of Chinese students I saw there,” Wang says. The experiences of these “parachute students,” traveling from vast Chinese cities to study at one of our state’s oldest and most prestigious private schools, planted a seed that would blossom into *Maineland*. “I began speaking with the school and its teachers to learn about the international program and ended up accompanying the admissions director on two trips to China.”

Maineland follows Stella Xinyi Zhu and Harry Junru He, two of 360,000 Chinese high schoolers currently studying in the U.S., as they come of age among the rolling countryside and complex social ecosystem of the modern American high school. They study, play tennis, join the cheerleading team, and roam the academy’s verdant grounds with their friends. “Harry in particular came to really appreciate the beauty and nature of Maine,” Wang says.



“I moved to Boston in 1990 with my parents when I was 12-years-old,” says Wang. “It was a very different time in terms of China’s global position—most of the coun-

TO KEEP THE LIGHT

What: A lighthouse keeper's wife struggles with her work and her sanity as she cares for her sick husband on an island in 19th-century Maine.

When: Available on Amazon.

Where: Moose Peak Island; Machiasport; Lubec

Who: Erica Fae (*Boardwalk Empire*); Jarlath Conroy (*True Grit*); David Patrick Kelly (*Twin Peaks*)

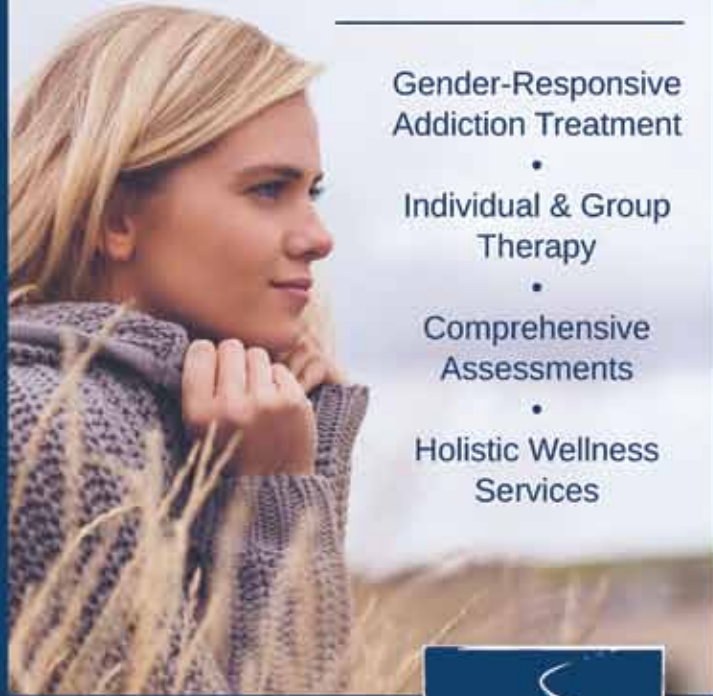
try was poor. We were poor. I grew up in a largely white community and had mainly white American friends." Harry and Stella, meanwhile, leave the vast metropolises of Guangzhou and Shanghai for the quiet of rural Maine at a very different moment in history. The rapidly changing identity and economics of China seep into the film, where parents will pay \$48,000 per year for their child's high school education and expect killer grades in return. Harry and Stella navigate the usual terrain of adolescence while coming to terms with their family's expectations, a changing understanding of American society, and their own identities. "Since the recession, the past ten years in China have been about financial growth," says Wang. "Stella's family owns a home electronics factory in Shanghai. She had to consider her family's desire for her to take over the family business against her growing awareness of the notion of individualistic thinking—this very American notion of fulfillment beyond making money."

The film has had its theatrical release at select theaters across the country. The movie is also readily available for school and educational programs. Wang hopes *Maineland* will be available on Amazon "by June or July of this year."

TO KEEP THE LIGHT

"I recently came across these stories of New England women who worked as lighthouse keepers in the 19th century, and I couldn't believe I'd never heard about them before," Newbury native Erica Fae says from her home in New York City, her new baby asleep

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CINEMA



HOLLY STAR
What: A broke puppeteer returns to Maine for Christmas, only to get wrapped up in a bizarre treasure hunt.
When: Planned release, Dec. 2018.
Where: Biddeford and Saco
Who: Katyln Carlson (*Going in Style*), Teya Patt (*Fresh Off The Boat*), and Brian Muller (*The Deuce*)

on her chest. The actor and screenwriter sat down to pen a short film inspired by the stories of the pioneering women who'd gripped her imagination. "My first draft was 60 pages long. I paused and thought 'Oh, I guess I'm making my first feature.'"

Released in March, *To Keep the Light* drew acclaim from a slew of film festivals, winning Best Director at the Berlin Independent Film Festival. "It's a wonderful affirmation for a small film without fancy producers and grants to win something like that," Fae says. The movie, which takes place on Moose Peak Island off Jonesport, tells the story of Abbie, a lighthouse keeper's wife forced to take over her husband's job when he falls ill. "She's an accidental feminist, though I hate that term," Fae says. "She's placed in a situation where she has to take on a traditionally male role. She becomes an advocate for her right to that job in the face of objection. She rises to it."

Many of Fae's projects, past and current, examine New England history—"moments and women from history that deserve more consideration," Fae says. Details of *To Keep The Light* are lifted directly from historical fact. "I read a lot about Maine's Abbie Burgess and Ida Louis from Rhode Island, both female lighthouse keepers."

Moose Peak Island is framed in full cinematic glory in every shot, with Abbie or the light tower often framed as lone figures among the angular rocks and

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CINEMA

swathes of seagrass. “I remember standing in front of *Christina’s World* when I was 14, absolutely captivated. I think much of the film’s visual style was influenced by the Wyeths.”

HOLLY STAR

Once upon a time, *Holly Star* started out as a big, studio movie set in Chicago starring two male leads. “Then I moved to the Saco/Biddeford area a few years ago,” says director Michael A. Nickles, newly relocated from LA. “I was charmed by the location and thought it would make a great backdrop for a film. So I wrote for the area.” You’ll spot Palace Diner, the Saco Drive-In, the Saco train station, the Pepperell Mill among the scenes. “We were lucky that both Saco and Biddeford embraced and supported the making of the film,” Nickles says. “I’ve made a fair amount of feature films [*Swing Away*, *Playback*] and have never gotten that kind of support from a community before.” Other nods to Maine are dotted among the script. “At



37’ Bunker & Ellis, 1977/2016,
John Deere 400 HP, \$420,000 (*Mary Lou*)



31’ Newman Friendship Sloop, 1981,
Universal 24 HP, \$85,000 (*Jabberwocky*)



36’ Chester Clement, 1932, Chris Craft 140
HP, rebuilt. \$75,000 (*Maddy Sue*)



32’ Newman Cruiser, 1974,
Chrysler 275 HP, 2015. \$75,000 (*Retriever*)



46’ Newman Sportfishing Cruiser, 1989,
Daewoo 808 HP, 2001. \$265,000 (*Cap’n B*)



33’ Beneteau 331, 2004, Westerbeke 27 HP,
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one point the couple goes to the Palace Diner to take part in a Christmas tradition they call 'building a pyramid,'" Nickles says. "It's basically a plate of ascending whoopie pies. Originally I think it was pizza or something, but I added the whoopie pies because everyone here is so in love with them."

The director now holds screenwriting and filmmaking workshops for Maine teens, including the Project Aware Summer Film Institute on Aug. 13-17. "The challenge now is to convince other producers and financiers to shoot here, because there isn't a tax incentive," Nickles says. "A filmmaker might love the state for creative reasons, but if it doesn't make sense on the money side, the project will go elsewhere. For Maine it would bring money for goods and services and labor."

Nickles hopes audiences will be able to enjoy *Holly Star* in time for the next holiday season. "With any luck, it will have a successful theatrical run in addition to being available on platforms like iTunes, Amazon, and Netflix." ■

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