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Summer Movie

Fine Arts Center film instructor Eric Rogers is using his extended vacation to demonstrate that molding young minds and crafting a cinematic vision are both forms of artistic expression

BY JAMES SHANNON

To the tired old canard, "Those who can't do, teach," Woody Allen famously added, "Those who can't teach, teach gym." These sentiments seem quaint and basically irrelevant during a visit to the set of Elizabeth Gunness, the feature-length motion picture currently in production in Upstate South Carolina. At age 34, writer-director Eric Rogers has already spent ten years as an educator at the high school level Fine Arts Center in Greenville, sending many of his students on to big-time film programs at New York University, the University of Southern California, the North Carolina School of the Arts and the Savannah School of Art and Design. Now it's his turn.



On location in Greenville and Clemson, Rogers is crafting a film best described as a quirky Southern character drama that seems to be more Flannery O'Connor than Tennessee Williams. The title character has what he describes as "an acute case of OCD [obsessive-compulsive disorder] - people who are sloppy annoy her." This annoyance manifests itself in some rather horrific ways, though Rogers insists the film is more psychological drama than horror movie. The story's timeless Gothic traits appear almost quaint in the early years of the 21st century, as the original screenplay makes clear in defining the fictional South Carolina town of Cloverdale where the tale unfolds:

"A town straight out of a Norman Rockwell illustration, this is the kind of place where every house displays an American flag; where all the boys become Eagle Scouts; where all the girls are "nice" and where being president of the Junior League is considered the highest honor in the town. Above the tree lined streets rises a single white steeple in front of a deep blue sky..."

Needless to say, although he is a graduate of Bob Jones University, Rogers did not establish this milieu to stage a Founders' Day parade. The lessons of human history simmer beneath the surface of the story. Behind the tidy facades of certain apparently cheery neighborhood dwellings, monsters await. You don't have to watch Larry King make nice with the parents of Jeffrey Dahmer for an hour to realize that the quiet person who lives next door might not exactly be as advertised. Betty Gunness, as the antagonistic protagonist of Elizabeth Gunness would rather be called, might just be that kind of neighbor.

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Bringing the story of Betty Gunness to life has required an unusual company of artists to



be assembled in Greenville this summer. More than any other art form except perhaps for a symphony orchestra, film is a collaborative medium that requires a variety of talents to mesh in order to articulate an artistic vision. Rogers has surrounded himself with a coterie of his current and former students, supplemented by other young artisans who have signed on for the hard work of making movies.

Camera operators, grips, gaffers, set dressers and production assistants are putting in long days that often last until dark to put Elizabeth Gunness on the screen. Even the young men and women working in the garden in front of the Rogers home are part of the cinematic corps, since the bungalow has been cast as the abode of the title character - and her garden is where some of those who annoy her end up.

A ringing affirmation of faith in the vision of Eric Rogers comes from the presence of two extraordinary women in this film company. The first is his wife, Jo Carol Mitchell-Rogers, who is his partner in every sense of the word. An artist herself, Jo Carol teaches in the art department at Anderson College and is the production designer for the movie. She has transformed their home into a den of kitsch and chintz suitable for a prim and proper murderess, but her mark is visible in every phase of this endeavor. She is producing the film with her husband, but also serving as "production manager, business manager, prop master, gardener, grocery shopper, dog wrangler and about a half a dozen other jobs on the crew," according to Eric.

To watch their collaboration in progress calls to mind nothing so much as Peter Bogdanovich and Polly Platt on *The Last Picture Show*. In retrospect, any doubts about the vitality of that marital artistic partnership must be set aside in light of the thoroughly mediocre career Bogdanovich recorded after abandoning Platt for Cybill Shepherd. Simply put, Jo Carol is both accomplished and personable, not to mention being one of the sharpest pencils in the box - and Eric is a better filmmaker because of it.

The other feminine pillar propping up the talented Mr. Rogers is actress Wendy Overly, who plays the title role in the movie. A former drama teacher at Clemson University, she is a native of New England who knew South Carolina well long before taking the Clemson job thanks to summer vacations as a child spent with relatives in the South. When Rogers saw her in a production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in Providence, Rhode Island, it confirmed his notion to cast her in his film. In fact, he wrote the screenplay with her in mind. To see Overly in costume and character reinforces the wisdom of his choice. She has literally become Betty Gunness.

"I look like a cross between Lady Byrd Johnson and Virginia Graham," she laughs. "The hair style goes a long way to age me, and really makes me feel like Miss Betty. I think I may go to church on Sunday and try to pass as 'one of them.' Miss Betty has a lovely go-to-Sunday-meeting dress that will help me blend right in."

The tremendous edge Overly gives this project is not just her enthusiasm, but her talent and experience as an actress. Here is where the method to Rogers' madness is most evident. With a seasoned veteran of many roles playing his central character, the director has a significant advantage over many first-time filmmakers who must make do with whoever they can recruit to work in front of the camera.

"It's a different kind of energy acting onstage, as opposed to working in films," says Wendy Overly. "You need more nuance in facial expression in a close-up medium like this." Shooting the screenplay out of sequence means the director must keep the actors in tune with the emotional pitch required in each scene. "In a play, you get on the ride that is the



play,” says Overly. “But in film, you have to chart the emotional arc of the character.”

Overly’s experience has also paid dividends for director Rogers in her interactions with 7-year-old Daley Fricks, who plays Madison. The young girl’s memorable encounters with Betty should live on in the memory of audiences, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy to shoot. Creating a bond between the two actresses is essential.

“Actually, Daley is wonderful,” says Overly. “I’ve never seen a young girl with such patience, long attention span and ability to pretend.” She describes a scene where Miss Betty gets upset with Madison and threatens to take her pet away. “I felt horrible saying the lines that I had to say to her, and once the shot was finished I gave her a hug and said, ‘I’m sorry I had to say those things. You know I was just acting, right?’ She said, ‘I think so,’ then gave me a huge smile. I hope that child doesn’t end up with nightmares that have my face in them. We don’t have the budget to have a therapist on set for either of us!”

Some challenges faced by the film company are of the more prosaic variety - like the day they had to come up with some movie vomit for a key scene. The trick is to make puke that looks real on camera, but not so authentic that it makes the cast and crew actually vomit. They finally settled on a concoction of blueberry pie, strawberry applesauce, instant grits, oatmeal, milk, clumps of flour and corn starch.

“Yum,” says Rogers. “I’ll let you wait for the movie to find out how it’s used. Suffice it to say that blueberry pie vomit plays prominently in a couple of scenes.” Is this guy an artist or what?

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Having emphasized the two women at the center of the Eric Rogers movie machine, it is fair to point out that he’s paying one and sleeping with the other. But his calculations run far beyond simple matters of cast and crew. The financial aspects of this project have received due attention as well. His production company, Anomaly LLC, has assembled a \$250,000 budget, mostly in \$500 increments, and received a number of in-kind contributions. Like any movie, the ultimate success or failure at the box office is really a crapshoot, with ancillary revenue sources like pay cable, television and DVD sales another unknown.

Rogers is doing all the right things to give Elizabeth Guinness a fighting chance. He is shooting film, not using the cheaper - and cheaper looking - digital video. The completed film will be shopped to film festivals from Toronto to Telluride and all points in between to search for an audience and a distributor. Meanwhile, this production is as close to an open book as any movie-in-the-works in memory. A website contains pictures and a production diary in the form of weblogs from Rogers and Overly as Miss Betty. Apparently, no event in the day-to-day life of the film is too trivial to mention, as I discovered when I read about the day Metrobeat came to visit.

Post-production will commence in earnest after principal photography wraps later this month, with late 2004 targeted for completion. This story transcends easy categorization, combining film, business and local color. To follow the progress of Eric, Jo Carol, Wendy and company, the website at www.elizabethgunness.com is updated almost daily. Metrobeat has an eye on this production as well, with updates here as events warrant. That’s a wrap.