

‘Masks in the Sun’: Locally made film premieres on the big screen

Annie J. Kelley 2:59 p.m. EDT August 14, 2014

MARSHALL — Eight minutes into the film “Masks in the Sun,” there’s a familiar white structure glowing in the background.

Brooks Memorial Fountain is bright in contrast to the figure in the foreground, the reflection of a man whose psyche is obviously unraveling.

The actor has a face that will be recognizable to anyone who attends community theater: It’s Randy Wolfe, artistic director of What A Do Theatre.

“Masks in the Sun” has many familiar faces and landmarks. Drew Walker — who wrote, directed and edited the film — said the city of Marshall is a star in its own right.

Not to mention the wealth of actors he had to choose from.

“We really got lucky, in that I think that we’re in an area that just has a good concentration of talented people,” Walker said.

Filming in Marshall wasn’t always easy. One day, during a scene at the Great Escape Stage Company, there was the sound of sudden activity out on Michigan Avenue.

What’s going on? Walker asked the others.

“They’re like, ‘oh, it’s Marshall. People are going out for ice cream. It’s a summer day, it’s 3 o’clock.’ ”

Mid-afternoon ice cream rushes notwithstanding, “Masks in the Sun” has been more than two years in the making. The final product, which is 2½ hours long, will finally get its premiere Saturday at the Franke Center for the Arts.

Tickets are \$5 and proceeds will go to a program at the Calhoun County Medical Care Facility that provides dementia patients with musical therapy.

“If you can find those songs and then introduce them to people with middle- or late-stage dementia, often who have become very uncommunicative, it has a potential to just do amazing things. It doesn’t heal them or anything like that, but it gives them some great experience,” Walker said.

While working on his doctorate, Walker studied people who had dementia. He later went on to work on a task force dealing with elder abuse for the state. These themes come up in his film, which he thought could be more fully expressed in fiction.

Time to roll out the red carpet

This is the first time “Masks in the Sun” will be shown to an audience. So far, the only people who have seen it are the few who worked on editing. The cast is excited to see the final product.

“From what I understand, it’s about the care of the elderly and people who are dealing with dementia and things like that,” said actress Tara Bouldrey. “And I think it’s really cool the way that Drew has sort of addressed it, but it’s not a documentary.”

There are many layers to the story. On one level, it’s a fictional documentary. It’s also a play version of the “Christmas Carol” that’s been turned into a commentary on elder abuse, it’s a movie about making a play version of “Christmas Carol,” it’s a conspiracy thriller that begins with a tragic murder, it’s a drama about adultery and it’s a mystery about some con artists trying to take advantage of the elderly.

“I’m kind of one of the bad guys,” Bouldrey said. “I have two lovers who I am playing against each other to try to overthrow a judge.”

The wife of the judge, played by Donna Daines, hatches a Hamlet-esque plot to expose the scheming of Bouldrey’s character. But one of her actors begins to go crazy.

The story reflects his disorientation. People with masks wander through houses and down the street. Dreams mix with scenes from a play and flashbacks and documentary scenes. Even the familiar streets of Marshall become an alternate reality, set in the Autonomous Province of Michigan.

Tommy Kawel plays Gabriel, a character whose identities are peeled away to reveal new ones. Kawel said the script was always developing through the process of making the movie. His scenes as Gabriel were mostly ad-libbed in a warehouse in Marshall.

“So, when it comes to chronology and the fact that I was playing two, or even three characters in the movie — you know, there was some of that with the initial read-through of the script, but ultimately in the end, it was like a puzzle that got thrown around, mixed into a million pieces, and then pieced back together in a very different way,” Kawel said.

Multiple identities

As an artist, Walker is drawn to issues of identity. He said he feels like he has a number of characters associated with his different labels.

He’s known as Drew Walker, but in 1991 he also became Dr. Walker after earning his doctorate in cultural anthropology.

In art circles, he’s taken on the name of Gabriel Embeha, film maker and performance artist. If you look at the end credits of “Masks in the Sun,” that’s what he goes by.

“Some of the directors I really admire play with multiple identities, or play with identities that are uncertain,” Walker said. “I’ve always liked that technique and I think within film, it’s possible to tell a story without sticking to the conventions of film. I think the conventions of film are all about the funding of film.”

Walker breaks with convention, but he wouldn’t call his film experimental. He sees it as a term from another era, when movies couldn’t be made for the art of it but needed theaters for distribution — and theaters needed a label.

“Can this film be distributed as a documentary or as a feature or as a short at some festival somewhere? And if it can’t then it must be experimental,” Walker said.

Now, a movie can be shot and sent into the world without spending millions of dollars.

“This new technology of the DSLR camera is making it possible to do what I’ve wanted to do for 20-some years: Is make a feature film that looks like a film,” Walker said.

Dream state

Walker has a master’s degree in performance art. He cited director Bertolt Brecht as one of his influences.

In the early part of the 20th century, theater was about creating a dream state for the audience, pulling them in without ever breaking that fourth wall.

“And he said: ‘But it doesn’t do anything in the world.’ There are problems out there, there are issues, there are things that need to be addressed, and a lot of artists want to address them. And he says they’re not succeeding,” Walker said. “And he says the reason they’re not succeeding is they’re scared that if they do anything that jumps out of the formula, any character jumps out of character, any characters are changed characters — if anything is incongruous in any way, if everything is not seamless, then you’ll lose them. It’s almost like you wake them up.”

What Brecht went on to prove is there is nothing to fear in waking the audience up. They will still follow along, and any crack in the facade will cause them to question what that crack is doing there.

“I think people can move forward without any kind of absolute certainty or absolute hero or absolute path to follow,” Walker said.

“Masks in the Sun” will raise questions, Walker said, and audience members can continue seeking the answers with an online alternate reality gaming element.

“The tickets themselves have different pictures on them and different numbers on them and those numbers can act like keys to different parts of an adventure,” Walker said.

It’s a big project, but Walker said at the age of 51, he’s not doing it to climb any kind of ladder of achievement.

“I’ve done a lot of things in my life at this point, so it’s not about — I don’t know — making a mark or something. I have a lot of experience, seen a lot of things, want to share and convey them and get people talking and doing things. Maybe.”

If you go

- **WHAT:** “Masks in the Sun” screening.
- **WHEN:** 7 p.m. Saturday.
- **WHERE:** Franke Center for the Arts, 214 E. Mansion St., Marshall.
- **COST:** \$5.
- **INFO:** Tickets available online at masksinthesun.com or in person at the Franke Center, the Ad-Visor and Chronicle Offices at 514 S. Kalamazoo St. or the Marshall Visitor Center and Chamber of Commerce at 323 W. Michigan Ave. There will be an after-party at Zarzuela.