

JOIN OUR NEWSLETTER

Life echoes art for director making movie about the theatre business

Nov 24, 2017 6:00 AM By: Michael D. Reid



Director Arl Bessai, right, with star Bruce Greenwood, left.

Arl Bessai is aware of the irony behind his motivation to cast some familiar faces in *Rehearsal* to improve his film's commercial prospects.

Bessai's experience mirrors the theme of his comedy, which features a cast headlined by Bruce Greenwood, a Quebec-born actor who works consistently in Hollywood.

Greenwood, whose roles include playing JFK in *Thirteen Days* and Capt. Pike in J.J. Abrams's *Star Trek* reboot, plays inner Horatio Longfellow, a curmudgeonly gay British actor and theatre director. In a desperate bid to save his financially ailing London theatre, the alcoholic stage veteran reluctantly agrees to cast a Hollywood action star, Chase Remington (Glee's Dean Geyer), in his production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*.

Other recognizable faces include David Cubitt as Longfellow's lover and producer, Rob Morrow (*Billions*) as Remington's agent and Victoria-raised Deborah Kara Unger as a legendary theatre star.

"I think this is always a big struggle," says Bessai, who filmed in London, Los Angeles and Vancouver. "You need star power to get money, but you have to make compromises along the way."

While Bessai admits he has made a few economic concessions during his career, his reputation as an uncompromising, albeit collaborative, filmmaker remains intact. Highlights include his breakout drama *Lola* (2001) and his family trilogy — *Mothers & Daughters* (2009), *Fathers & Sons* (2010) and *Sisters & Brothers* (2011).

Bessai has made three of his films in Victoria, starting with *Emile*, his 2003 drama starring Sir Ian McKellen as an elderly British academic and Unger as his estranged niece. He returned to make *Severed* (2005), a cautionary tale in the guise of a zombie flick featuring loggers and environmentalists; and *Normal*, his 2007 ensemble drama starring Carrie-Anne Moss and Kevin Zegers as characters coping with a tragedy.

It seems fitting that Bessai is returning to a city he adores to discuss his improvisational directing style at a CineVic workshop on April 2, and to present *Rehearsal* at Movie Monday the following night. "I'm focusing on doing projects that speak to me personally," the Vancouver-based filmmaker says. "I channel people like John Cassavetes who just stay focused on the creative process."

Rehearsal, which chronicles the clash of egos and backstage drama that ensues during the creative standoff between Longfellow and Remington, Bessai unleashes his viewpoint with lacerating wit. Combined with impressive performances and visual style, Bessai's humour compensates for some contrivances and stereotypes that populate a familiar scenario.

In one sequence, a bearded, white-haired Greenwood, apparently channelling McKellen, can barely suppress his contempt for Remington, the shallow celebrity he has been saddled with.

"I think it's dialogue-heavy," says Remington, seemingly modelled on Jesse Metcalfe and Vin Diesel. "There are places we can make some cuts ... to keep the pace going."

When an incredulous Longfellow retorts "Cuts to Chekhov?" his pampered star doubles down, also suggesting the Chekhovian characters' names are confusing and should be changed.

"Perhaps we should use name tags," deadpans Longfellow.

Bessai also pokes fun at neophyte arts reporters who ask inane questions, and a dim Hollywood starlet who asks her buff boyfriend why he's doing "a *Star Trek* play."

It's not Chekov from Star Trek," he corrects her. "It's a Russian play from the 1800s."

Another highlight is Vince Mai's catchy jazz score, giving Rehearsal the feel of a Woody Allen film.

Rehearsal is one of a series of projects Bessai is doing that are inspired by stage classics he loves. "I saw *The Seagull* on stage many years ago, and I was struck by how completely connected the material was to the contemporary movie business, with issues around fame, celebrity, vanity, age," he said. "It all seemed so ahead of its time."

His Chekhov homage will be followed by *The Lears*, a love letter to *King Lear* starring Bruce Dern, and *Kreuzberg*, a Romeo and Juliet-inspired film he's shooting in Berlin this summer.
