

MAD SHIP – PRESS KIT
Submitted by: RoseAnna Schick, RAS Creative

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GENERAL INFO

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Tomas Sorensen is a man of great passion, optimism and ideals. A Norwegian immigrant to Western Canada in the 1920's, he dreams of establishing a family wheat dynasty. But the perfect storm of prairie drought and the economic crash of 1929 delivers his family to the precipice of ruin. When his beautiful wife, Solveig dies, he vows to return her body to her homeland, embarking on a Quixotic mission to build a ship and sail out of the prairie dust bowl. He is pulled back from the brink of madness by the unconditional love of his young children.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Mad Ship is the story of Tomas Sorensen, a Scandinavian immigrant to the Canadian prairies in the 1920s.

He is a man of great passion and great integrity, who dreams of creating a family wheat dynasty in this new land of opportunity. He is also a man who is deeply in love with his beautiful wife, Solveig, and together they have a profound bond that sustains them. But prairie drought and the Great Depression conspire against them, and the family is brought to ruin when their crops are destroyed by a massive dust storm.

Facing foreclosure at the bank, Solveig suggests that they return to their homeland. But Tomas refuses to give up in Canada, too proud to return as a failure. He leaves Solveig and their two young children in search of work in a distant city, setting off a series of events that soon turn tragic.

Tomas returns home after several months to find Solveig dead and the children alone in the house and terrified. He goes mad with grief, and grows obsessed with the idea of returning Solveig's body to their homeland. He embarks on a Quixotic mission to build a sailboat and sail out of the prairie dust bowl along a network of rivers leading to Hudson Bay and the ocean beyond.

Once the sailboat is complete, he straps the harness over his shoulders and begins to drag the boat through the burnt-out landscape to the distant river. Tomas stubbornly continues on, dragging the sailboat through the sand dunes, convinced that his salvation lies in the act of returning Solveig's body to their homeland.

Ultimately, Tomas is pulled back from the brink of certain death by the love and hope offered by his two young children.

Mad Ship is a sweeping story centred on an epic love affair between a husband and wife. It is also a story about the burden of dreams – a prairie dust bowl *Fitzcarraldo*.

Inspired by a true story.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

TOMAS SORENSEN: 39, tall, very manly; originally Danish but raised in Norway, he is married to his first and only love, with two young children. Tomas is stoic in public but passionate and loving at home, driven, hard-working, prideful, but also a dreamer. Trained as a ship builder in Norway, he is a master carpenter, and built the family's prairie home by hand. He had brought his bride, Solveig, to Canada, where the two had set down roots as farmers in Manitoba. However, when tragedy strikes and Solveig dies due to events Tomas set in motion, he goes mad with grief, cannibalizing the farmhouse he had lovingly constructed, to build a boat in the middle of the landlocked, burnt-out prairie. Obsessed with the idea of returning Solveig's body to Norway with this boat, he is pulled back from the brink of fatal exhaustion by his two young children.

SOLVEIG SORENSEN: 38, lovely and graceful with a natural elegance, she is Tomas' loving wife who rejected a comfortable life in Norway to accompany the man she loved to Canada. The mother of two children, she is a warm, thoughtful, intelligent woman, but also practical and pragmatic. When their crop is wiped out by a prairie dust storm leaving everything in ruins, Solveig realizes the family's only recourse is to return home to Norway. But Tomas's pride will not allow him to give up on his dream of a life in Canada, and Solveig relents in an effort to keep the family – and their deep marital bond – in tact. After Tomas leaves home in search of work, a desperate Solveig makes a soul-destroying compromise with the banker, hoping to stave off foreclosure.

ARCHIBALD CAMERON: In his mid 50s, he is an essentially well-meaning, but weak and ultimately powerless man. Truly sorry to have to foreclose on so many farms during the hard times of the Depression, and clearly saddened by the Sorensen's plight, he nevertheless carries out the orders from head office – doing what is necessary to survive himself. Sexually repressed in a platonic relationship with his wife, Judith, he grows very attracted to Solveig, and soon makes it clear that the two might be able to come to some sort of arrangement. Later, he is upset to discover that she is pregnant, but even more shattered to learn that she has died.

PETTER: 11, bright, sensitive, practical and observant, he is the Sorensen's son. Wise for his years, he loves his parents, and is protective towards his younger sister. Stepping in as the man of the house when his father leaves to seek work, Petter is scared, and not sure what to do when he discovers that his mother has died. It both saddens and unnerves the young boy as he witnesses his father's descent into madness.

JUDITH: In her mid-50's, childless, she is Cameron's wife and at first glance a rather sanctimonious, hard-hearted woman. She is surprised and threatened by her husband's feelings of sympathy for the Sorensens who are facing foreclosure. She is complacent in her comfortable life, proud of her standing in the town, and determined that she and Cameron survive the Depression unscathed. She is unnerved by her husband's interest in the lovely Solveig, realizing too late that something is going on between the two. Ultimately showing true compassion – although with somewhat questionable motives – she later takes pity on the motherless Sorensen children, who are in need of care and food, and takes them into her home.

LIV: 6, she is the Sorensen's adorable and impressionable young daughter. She is innocence personified, and seemingly safe in the protected world her parents have tried to maintain. Seen in the aftermath of her mother's death, the little girl is a disheveled mess. She is scared, needy and starving, almost grown feral, and eager for affection and protection.

EDMUND: 48, he has inherited his father-in-law's undertaking business. Trapped in a business and a marriage he can no longer tolerate, he has become a brusque, hard-edged, foul-mouthed, moody, bitter and resentful man who feels his life has been fraught with mistakes (or at least one major mistake). He harbors memories of grand plans for a carefree life on the west coast. Now he is losing the business and can see no form of escape except for the formaldehyde-soaked cigarettes he smokes to obliterate reality. Reluctantly, he agrees to hire Tomas to build coffins.

ADELINE: 36, she is Edmund the undertaker's wife, an attractive but defeated looking woman. The deteriorating marriage, and the stress of the failing business, has made her alternately shrewish and needy. She is starved for attention, for a gesture of kindness. It is Adeline who insists on hiring Tomas to help build coffins for the funeral parlour. Clearly attracted to Tomas, she would like him to make love to her, but relents when he gently rebuffs her. Her botched attempt at seduction makes her understand just how far she has fallen.

PRODUCTION COMPANY PROFILES

BUFFALO GAL PICTURES

Buffalo Gal Pictures is an independent production company based in Winnipeg, Canada. They have developed and produced many challenging and diverse projects by creating collaborative relationships with creative talent and building successful co-production partnerships.

Buffalo Gal Pictures has produced or co-produced numerous feature films including Guy Maddin's new film *Keyhole*, starring Isabella Rossellini and Jason Patric; Cherien Dabis' *Amreeka*; Guy Maddin's *My Winnipeg* and *The Saddest Music in the World*; Kari Skogland's *The Stone Angel*; and Gary Yates' *High Life* and *Seven Times Lucky*.

Buffalo Gal films have screened at the Toronto International Film Festival, Sundance, Directors' Fortnight and the Berlinale, and garnered many international awards.

ENIGMATICO FILMS

Enigmatico Films was formed in 1993 by husband-and-wife team David Mortin and Patricia Fogliato, both of whom are writers, producers and directors. They just completed their first theatrical feature film *Mad Ship*, and are currently developing other dramatic films, including *The Songbird*, a Victorian romance about an obsessive love affair between two aerial high-wire artists, and *The Gravesavers*, a family film adapted from the Sheree Fitch novel about a twelve-year-old girl who becomes haunted by the history of the most tragic Maritime shipwreck prior to the *Titanic*.

David and Patricia's most recent production is *Black Widow* (2005), a macabre film noir musical starring singers Sarah Slean, Martin Tielli, Mary Margaret O'Hara, and actors Tom McCamus and Julian Richings. The film, which premiered on CBC Television in January 2006, received a Czech Crystal, for Best Performing Arts Program at the prestigious Golden Prague International Television Festival. The film also received six Gemini Award nominations.

Youkali Hotel (2003), also for CBC Television, stars acclaimed Canadian cabaret singer Patricia O'Callaghan, and features performances by Mary Margaret O'Hara, Hawksley Workman, Kurt Swinghammer and Albert Schultz. *Youkali Hotel* was nominated for the Rose D'Or in Europe, and received three 2004 Gemini Award nominations, and three awards at the 2004 Yorkton Film Festival.

Also in 2003, Patricia wrote and directed *Dear Juliet*, an hour-long documentary for TVOntario's *The View From Here*. The film explores the enduring myth of Shakespeare's tragic heroine, and the thousands of lovelorn letters which people from all over the world write to her each year, addressed simply to Juliet, Verona, Italy.

David has co-written several performance specials for Rhombus Media, including the Emmy Award-nominated *September Songs: The Music of Kurt Weill* (1995), starring Teresa Stratas, Elvis Costello, Nick Cave, Lou Reed, Betty Carter and Charlie Haden. He was also Co-Writer and Associate Director of *Tuscan Skies - Andrea Bocelli* (2001) for A&E Television, and *Stormy Weather: The Music of Harold Arlen* (2002), featuring singers Sandra Bernhard, Deborah Harry, Jimmy Scott and Rufus Wainwright.

David and Patricia co-directed and produced *Enigmatico* (1995), a Genie-nominated and Hot Docs Award-winning arts documentary that interweaves the poetry, opera, painting, sculpture and photography of several prominent Italian-Canadian artists; *Time on Earth* (1997), which follows three seniors as they travel the highways of North America in their motor-homes; and *The Lanza Sessions* (2000), a behind-the-scenes portrayal of the recording of the musical soundtrack for a yet-to-be-made Hollywood biography of Mario Lanza, featuring Canadian opera star, Richard Margison, as the voice of Lanza.

CAST BIOS

NIKOLAJ LIE KAAS as TOMAS

Nikolaj Lie Kaas is one of the most popular and versatile Danish actors. He made his first film at the age of 18, when he starred in Søren Kragh-Jacobsen's *The Boys from St. Petri* (1991). His debut won him both The Danish Critic Association's Bodil Award, and The Danish Film Academy's Robert Award.

Lie Kaas graduated from The Danish National School of Theatre in 1998, and later that year he played Jeppe in Lars von Trier's dogma film *The Idiots*, which won him another Bodil Award. Since then, audiences have experienced Nikolaj Lie Kaas' great talent in numerous movies. He was the softest of the tough guys in Anders Thomas Jensen's success *Flickering Lights* (2000), while the unique and loveable Achmed in *Truly Human* (2001) won him another Robert Award. He also won a Robert for his role as the bitter and disillusioned Joachim in Susanne Bier's *Open Hearts* (2002).

Lie Kaas played Alex David in Christoffer Boe's *Reconstruction* (2003), which won the Camera d'Or award at the Cannes Film Festival, and later that year he portrayed the very different twins Bjarne and Eigil in the dark comedy *The Green Butchers*. In 2003, Lie Kaas was named Shooting Star at the Berlin Film Festival.

In Susanne Biers *Brothers* (2004), Lie Kaas played the deceitful brother Jannik, and the ambitious lawyer Jonas in the thriller *The Candidate* (2008). Recently, audiences all over the world have experienced Lie Kaas as the Assassin in Ron Howard's blockbuster *Angels & Demons* (2009).

Lie Kaas has also impressed audiences and critics in numerous plays. In 1999 he won the esteemed Reumert Talent Award and the Reumert Award for the title role in The Danish Royal Theatre's production of *Peer Gynt* in 2002. Alongside Nicolas Bro, Kaas delivered an unforgettable performance in *Rosenkrantz og Gyldenstjerne* in 2006 – the same year he won the award for Best Actor on Stage. The last time Lie Kaas impressed on stage was in the role of Nick in *Virginia Woolf* in 2008. Since then, he has been opposite Rachel Weisz in *The Whistleblower*.

His latest project is the 2011 critically acclaimed *DIRCH* aka *A Funny Man*, for which he won both the Bodil and the Robert for his portrayal of Denmark's most talented comedian Dirch Passer.

GIL BELLOWS as CAMERON

Gil Bellows is best known for the role of Billy Thomas in the Emmy and Golden Globe Award winning FOX series *Ally McBeal*.

Bellows was most recently seen on the ABC series *Flash Forward*, starring Joseph Fiennes. He also appeared as Frank Trammell on the FOX hit series *24*, opposite Kiefer Sutherland. In 2010, Bellows starred in independent films *A Night of Dying Tigers*, starring Jennifer Beals and directed by Terry Miles; *The Maiden Danced to Death*, directed by Endre Hules; and *The Year Dolly Parton Was My Mom* opposite Masha Grenon.

In 2008, Bellows shot *The Promotion* for Dimension Films, starring opposite Seann William Scott and John C. Reilly, written and directed by Steve Conrad. Additional recent credits include *bgFATldy* and *Kill Kill Faster Faster*. Bellows recently completed work on *Toronto Stories*, a collaborative project by Sook-Yin Lee, David Sutherland, David Weaver, and Aaron Woodley, and the Canadian War-time drama *Passchendaele*. In 2005, Bellows was seen in Paramount Pictures *The Weatherman* opposite Nicolas Cage, and starred in The Channel 4 ten-part miniseries *Terminal City* for which he was nominated for a Gemini Award.

Bellows gained attention among filmgoers and critics for his portrayal of an inmate with a penchant for knowledge in the critically lauded *Shawshank Redemption*, opposite Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman. Other film credits include *Love and a .45* opposite Renee Zellweger; *Miami Rhapsody* with Sarah Jessica Parker; *Richard III* directed by Al Pacino, *The Assistant* with Joan Plowright and Armin Mueller-Stahl; *Dinner at Fred's* with Parker Posey; *Judas Kiss* with Emma Thompson and Alan Rickman; *Chasing Sleep* opposite Jeff Daniels; and *Beautiful Joe* opposite Sharon Stone.

On stage, Bellows appeared in Manhattan Class Company's production of *A Snake in the Vein*, in the Playwrights Horizons production of *Flaubert's Latest* and UBU Repertory's *Best of Schools*. He is a founding member of the Seraphim Theater Company in New York for whom he starred in *True West*, *Road*, and *The User's Waltz*. He was also a member of the Act One Repertory Company of the prestigious Williamstown Theater Festival in Massachusetts.

Beyond acting, Bellows credits extend to producing. Bellows was producer for *Sweet Land*, which won Best First Feature at the Independent Spirit Awards. His most recent producer credit is *Temple Grandin*, which debuted on HBO to critical acclaim, and nominated for 15 Emmy Awards.

LINE VERNDAL as SOLVEIG

Line Verndal is a highly appreciated and famous actress in Norway, renowned for diving deep into her characters, and almost being absorbed. The audience can sense her pain somewhere within the strength and beauty.

Educated at the National Academy of the Arts in Oslo, she had her first professional practise mostly from theatres. Line has successfully done parts on stage as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, Nastasia Filippovna in Dostojevskij's *The Idiot*, Masha in Tsjekov's *Three Sisters*, and Sugar in the musical *Sugar* to mention a few notable roles.

Line has had major roles in numerous television series. Her professional break through was on television in 2009, playing the lead in a 24-episode series called *Himmelblå*, on the Norwegian state channel NRK. *Himmeblå* had the highest ratings of all times for a drama series in Norway, and Line was nominated for the Norwegian Grammy award, Golden Window, three years in a row.

Having starred in several feature films throughout her career, Line won an Amanda, the Norwegian Oscar award, in 2011. Line won as Best Actress in a Leading Role for the feature film *Limbo*, directed by Maria Soedahl. With the strong and deeply felt performance in *Limbo*, Line was renowned internationally for her genuine acting.

GAGE MUNROE as PETTER

MARTHA BURNS as JUDITH

Martha Burns is one of Canada's most distinguished stage and television actresses. She has performed leading roles at the Stratford and Shaw Festivals, and at theatres across the country. Winner of the 2005 Barbara Hamilton Award for "excellence and professionalism in the performing arts," she has also received two Dora Mavor Moore Awards for her work in *Trafford Tanzi* and *The Miracle Worker*, and has been nominated for three more.

Martha is the recipient of two supporting actress Genie Awards for *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *Love and Savagery*, and a double Gemini Award winner for best actress for the leading role of Ellen Fanshaw in three seasons of *Slings and Arrows*.

Martha and Susan Coyne wrote and directed the short film *How Are You*, which was an official selection for TIFF 2008. She co-produced all of and directed one of ten short films that form the anthology *Little Films About Big Moments* for Movie Central and TMN.

A founding member of Toronto's Soulpepper Theater Company, where she appeared to great acclaim as Winnie in Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*, Martha has created numerous ground-breaking educational programs for youth.

LANE STYLES as LIV

Lane was born an Aquarius in Winnipeg, Manitoba, as her two older sisters anxiously awaited her arrival. She naturally was thrown into the world of girl stuff and wanted to do everything way before her time. She not only wanted to keep up, she wanted to beat her sisters at everything. At bedtime Lane would cry if she wasn't first to the top of the stairs.

One day when Lane's mom left the standing toilet paper holder in the front landing, three-year-old Lane discovered it, took it into the family room, and started to sing and dance to her favorite Dora dance hit, Kool & The Gang's *Celebration*. The family still loves to watch this home video titled *Lane's First Microphone*.

Lane can entertain herself for hours playing with Barbies and American Girls, and will spend weeks devising and creating new sets for the dolls. Once everything is absolutely perfect, the camera comes out.

With no previous exposure to the world of auditions or moviemaking, at the age of 6, Lane was asked to audition for the role of Liv in *Mad Ship*. The audition was only 10 minutes, and Lane got the part. Although Lane's mom was nervous signing the deal memo, and wondered if Lane could handle the task, the amazing cast and crew left them with great memories and a desire for more.

Lane loves the challenge of auditions and hopes to appear in many more movies. She enjoys gymnastics, aerial dance, and acting classes. In the summer months, Lane loves to spend time at her grandparents' cottage.

AIDAN DEVINE as EDMUND

Aidan Devine is a multi-award winning actor. He spent twelve years honing his skills performing in theatre in Montreal and Ottawa before beginning his career in film and television in Toronto. He's won Gemini's for leading roles in CBC's *Net Worth* and CTV's *The Avro Arrow*, and has been nominated on three other occasions. Aidan jumped at the chance to work on *Mad Ship* and enjoyed being enveloped by the creator's artistic process.

RACHEL BLANCHARD as ADELINE

Not afraid of taking risks, Rachel Blanchard plays a wide range of comedic and dramatic roles in both commercial and independent films and television. Most recently these have included a recurring role in the BAFTA winning British comedy series *Peep Show*, and a recurring role in the hit HBO series *Flight of the Concorde*. Blanchard starred opposite Colin Firth and Kevin Bacon in director Atom Egoyan's critically acclaimed film *Where the Truth Lies*, and also appears in Egoyan's feature *Adoration*. She can be seen in *Dark Hearts*, opposite Goran Visnjic and Kyle Schmidt, and The Movie Network comedy series *Call Me Fitz*, for which she won the Gemini for Best Comedic Actress.

CREW BIOS

DANIEL IRON, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

PHYLLIS LAING, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Phyllis Laing, President of Buffalo Gal Pictures, established the company in 1994 using her keen sense of business, creative vision, and knowledge of the film industry to steadily drive the company toward its present success. Her business acumen has twice been honoured by the Women's Business Owners of Manitoba. She received the Women Entrepreneur of the Year award in 1994 and the Impact on Local Economy award in 2002.

Phyllis' selected producer credits include feature films *New In Town* (2009) and *The Haunting In Connecticut* (2008) for Gold Circle Films; *The Hessen Affair* (2008) in co-production with Belgium's Corsan; and *The Heaven Project* (2008) co-produced with Mandeville Films. She also co-produced the television series *Less Than Kind* (2008) for Citytv with Breakthrough Entertainment; and *Rough* (2008), a two part mini-series produced for the CBC with Sienna Films.

She is very proud to have been part of *My Winnipeg* (2007), the acclaimed docu-fantasy written and directed by Guy Maddin, which premiered at the 2007 Toronto International Film Festival and won the Citytv Award for Best Canadian Feature; and *The Stone Angel* (2007), the feature film directed by Kari Skogland, which also premiered at the 2007 Toronto International Film Festival.

JOHN CARBONE, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

An avid screenwriter, John finished his first full-length screenplay at the age of 15 and another three full-length screenplays before heading to the New York Film Academy and receiving his diploma for screenwriting.

When the opportunity to return to the NYFA came up, John headed to their L.A. Division to pursue an education in Film Making. After the intensive hands-on program and over 1500 hours behind the camera, John returned to York University to finish a degree in Philosophy, while also studying Linguistics.

John was a member of the Berkshire Axis Media team, before its official founding date, in January 2010. Since his time began at B.A.M. John has continued to write but has also being a hands-on producer in B.A.M.s first film, *House of the Rising Sun*, and executive producer of their next two *Séance: The Summoning* and *Mad Ship*.

MARK SANDERS, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

KNUT SKOGLUND, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

DAVID MORTIN, PRODUCER/ CO-WRITER/ DIRECTOR

David Mortin formed Enigmatico Films in 1993 with his wife, Patricia Fogliato. *Mad Ship* is their first dramatic feature production, which they co-wrote and David directed.

Previously, David co-wrote, co-produced and directed *Black Widow* (2005), a macabre film noir musical starring singers Sarah Slean, Martin Tielli, Mary Margaret O'Hara, and actors Tom McCamus and Julian Richings. The hour-long film, produced for CBC Television, received a Czech Crystal for Best Performing Arts Program at the prestigious Golden Prague International Television Festival, and six Gemini Award nominations.

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David and Patricia's earlier documentary collaborations include *Enigmatico* (1995), a Genie nominated and Hot Docs Award-winning arts documentary that interweaves the poetry, opera, painting, sculpture and photography of several prominent Italian-Canadian artists; *Time on Earth* (1997), which follows three seniors as they travel the highways of North America in their motor-homes; and *The Lanza Sessions* (2000), a behind-the-scenes portrayal of the recording of the musical soundtrack for a yet-to-be-made Hollywood biography of Mario Lanza.

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David and Patricia live in Caledon, Ontario, with their two teenage daughters. They are currently developing a new slate of theatrical feature scripts, including *The Songbird*, a dark Victorian-era fable about a tragic love affair between two aerial high-wire artists, set against the tumultuous backdrop of Niagara Falls and the world of 19th century circus spectacles.

PATRICIA FOGLIATO, PRODUCER/ CO-WRITER

Patricia Fogliato is co-owner of Enigmatico Films, along with her husband David Mortin. *Mad Ship* is their first dramatic feature production, which they co-wrote, and David directed.

Previous productions include *Black Widow* (2005), which Patricia co-wrote and produced, and is a macabre *film noir* musical starring singers Sarah Slean, Martin Tielli, Mary Margaret O'Hara, and actors Tom McCamus and Julian Richings. The hour-long film, produced for CBC Television, received a Czech Crystal for Best Performing Arts Program at the prestigious Golden Prague International Television Festival, and six Gemini Award nominations.

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In 2004, Patricia wrote and directed *Dear Juliet*, an hour-long documentary produced by Primitive Entertainment for TVOntario's *The View From Here*. The film explores the enduring myth of Shakespeare's tragic heroine, and the thousands of lovelorn letters which people from all over the world write to her each year, addressed simply to Juliet, Verona, Italy.

Patricia and David are currently developing several theatrical feature scripts, including *The Songbird* and *The Gravesavers*.

LIZ JARVIS, PRODUCER

Liz Jarvis joined Buffalo Gal Pictures in 1995 and has contributed to the company as a producer, production executive, production supervisor, post-production supervisor, and assistant director.

Most recently, Liz was involved with the Canadian interprovincial co-productions *Mad Ship*, with Enigmatico Films from Ontario, and *The Year Dolly Parton Was My Mom*, with Palomar from Quebec.

Liz co-produced the US-Canada- Kuwait co-production *Amreeka*, a film by Cherien Dabis, which premiered at Sundance 2009, and screened at Directors' Fortnight in Cannes, where it won the FIPRESCI Critics Prize. She also produced *High Life*, a film by Winnipeg-based director Gary Yates, which premiered at Panorama, Berlin 2009. In 2007, Liz collaborated with writer-director Kari Skogland to produce the feature film *The Stone Angel*, starring Ellen Burstyn, and based on the beloved novel by Margaret Laurence.

Liz is actively involved as a mentor for upcoming filmmakers, is a consultant for the National Screen Institute of Canada, and teaches Producing for Film at the University of Winnipeg.

RHONDA BAKER, CO-PRODUCER

Rhonda Baker of RGB Productions Inc. is an independent producer of feature films. She has been making movies for more than 25 years, with projects such as horror flick *Chained* a.k.a. *Rabbit* directed by Jennifer Lynch (*Surveillance*, *Boxing Helena*) starring Vincent D'Onofrio; France/Canada treaty co-production *The Tall Man*, starring Jessica Biel; and treaty co-pro *Faces in the Crowd*, starring Milla Jovovich, for Forecast Pictures, Radar Films and Mindseye Entertainment.

The Messengers, a horror film released in February 2007 by Sony Pictures/Screen Gems, opened #1 in North America at the box office. It was directed by twin brothers Oxide and Danny Pang, and produced by the renowned Sam Raimi (*Spiderman*, *Spiderman 2*, *Spiderman 3*, *Drag Me To Hell*). The period picture from the 1950's, *Hungry Hills*, was filmed on location in Saskatchewan and had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2010.

Rhonda produced Stephen King's *Dolan's Cadillac* in 2008 with director Jeff Beesley, starring Christian Slater, Emmanuelle Vaugier and Wes Bentley; and *One Last Dance*, which filmed on location in Manitoba for Minds Eye Entertainment, with producing team Patrick Swayze and Lisa Niemi. *Tideland*, directed by Terry Gilliam (*Monty Python*, *Brothers Grimm*, *Twelve Monkeys*) and produced by Gabriella Martinelli of Capri Films and Jeremy Thomas of Recorded Pictures in the UK, was launched at the 2005 Toronto International Film Festival prior to its North America release.

Rhonda has an impressive slate of development projects, with *Unfinished Business* at the top of the development slate for 2013.

RÉJEAN LABRIE, PRODUCTION DESIGNER

With more than 50 productions as production designer and art director, Réjean Labrie excels in transforming ideas and words that bring the audience into the character's world.

Réjean was born in Quebec City. He first enrolled in architecture at Laval University, followed by studying set design for theatre and film at Concordia University in Montreal. He travelled west to enroll in scenography at the Banff School of Fine Arts, and his work for theatre brought him to Winnipeg, where he became involved in the film industry. With the support of a very talented crew, Réjean quickly established himself as the leading production designer.

His first main collaboration was with influential director Guy Maddin for whom he designed *Twilight of Ice Nymphs*, *The Saddest Music of the World*, *The Heart of the World* and *My Winnipeg*. The critically

acclaimed productions brought him three Blizzard Awards. Other Canadian features include *Lucid* with director Sean Garrity, and *The Law of Enclosures*, directed by John Greyson

Réjean has designed many successful made-for-TV films and series. Credits with director Norma Bailey are *Cowboys & Indians: The JJ Harper Story*, and *Nights Below Station Street*, both for CBC. For the network YTV, he designed three Seasons of *The Adventures of Shirley Holmes* and two seasons of *2030 CE*.

In the last two years, Réjean has worked with Frantic Films designing the well-received TV series *Todd & The Book of Pure Evil* for the Space Channel, and two mini-series about the life of Don Cherry for CBC Television, for which he received a Gemini nomination.

MICHAEL MARSHALL, DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Michael Marshall has been churning away in the film business for over 25 years now. His projects range from things like the feature film *Ginger Snaps Back* to an end-of-the world mini-series for CBS. Recent credits include the award winning series *Less Than Kind*, sci-fi horror series *Todd & The Book of Pure Evil*, and gore fest *Wrong Turn 4*.

PATTI HENDERSON, COSTUME DESIGNER

Patti Henderson is a two-time Gemini nominee for Best Costume Design. She was born a 'Prairie Girl' in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where she began her costume career with a home-based business. This led to her first on-set costume experience, where she discovered a passion for film and television costuming and an ambition to develop her craft further.

Patti's first contract as Costume Designer was on the feature film *Blue State*, starring Anna Paquin. *Blue State* premiered at the 2007 Tribeca Film Festival. Subsequent costume design feature film credits include *Beethoven's Christmas Adventure* for NBC/Universal Studios; *Amreeka*, which premiered at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival and also won the International Federation of Film Critics Award at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival; and *Walk All Over Me* starring Lee Sobieski, which premiered at the 2007 Toronto International Film Festival.

Television dramas for which Patti designed costumes include *The Wrath of Grapes: Don Cherry Part 2*; the Gemini nominated mini-series *Keep Your Head Up Kid: The Don Cherry Story*; and Lifetime mini-series *The Capture of the Green River Killer*, which earned a Gemini Award nomination in 2008 for Best Costume Design.

Patti's assistant costume design work includes the feature film *Capote*, which received a nomination from the Costume Designers Guild for Excellence in a Period Film. Other notable projects include *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, *A Bear Named Winnie* for CBC, and *The Many Trials of One Jane Doe*.

Prior to becoming a costume designer, Patti honed her craft as costume set supervisor and personal dresser on several feature films and television series. Some of the productions include *Seven Times Lucky* starring Kevin Pollak, *One Last Dance* starring Patrick Swayze, and *Framed* starring Rob Lowe and Sam Neil.

Patti is well-known for her expertise in period costumes as well as her strong contemporary fashion sense in film and television.

TRAVIS MARSZALEK, KEY HAIR STYLIST

Travis Marszalek is an award winning hairstylist with over 30 years of acclaimed international experience working in NYC, LA, London and Paris. A favorite among top celebrities, Travis' client list includes Mariah Carey, Tom Hanks, Matt Damain and Daryl Hannah.

Travis' skill, expertise and diversity as a hair and wig stylist extend to every genre from classic to modern to period and horror. Now based in Canada, Travis works as a key hairstylist for feature film and television.

DOUG MORROW, MAKE UP ARTIST

Makeup artist Doug Morrow has worked in the film and television industry for more than 20 years. He patterns his work ethic after the makeup men of the 30's and 40's, who could do beauty makeup one second and apply prosthetics, lay a beard or do blood work the next. His credits include *The X-Files*, *Jumanji*, *Capote* and *Goon*.

PRODUCTION NOTES

THE IDEA FOR THE FILM

David Mortin and Patricia Fogliato are Ontario-based filmmakers who write, produce and direct together. They are also husband and wife, and that allows them ample time to mull over new projects together in their home.

“Patricia and I have collaborated on documentaries and performing arts films for 20 years, often co-writing and producing and directing together, so we have a very easy flow of communication between us,” says Mortin, who co-wrote and co-produced *Mad Ship* with Fogliato. “The script is often the last thing we talk about at night, and the first thing we talk about in the morning. And we generally cook dinner together – if you can cook together, you can write a script together.”

While some might find it difficult to live and work with your spouse, Fogliato believes it works well for the two of them.

“We’ve written about five scripts together now, and the way that we tend to work is kind of a finders-keepers system that we have. Whoever comes up with the initial idea is the one who gets to write the script, but we talk about it in a lot of depth, and work out all the details of the story together. It goes back and forth between us, with one person coming up with an idea that inspires another idea from the other person. It goes on like that for a long time to the point where in the end, we can’t remember whose idea was whose.

“It was actually David that first came across the idea for *Mad Ship*, and we both became totally enamoured with the idea and the visual possibilities.”

Mortin, who also directed *Mad Ship*, explains the genesis of what would eventually become the epic story that he and Patricia were driven to tell.

“*Mad Ship* is loosely based on a true story of a Finnish man who came to the western prairies in the early 1920s. He had a very eccentric dream of returning to Finland by building a boat, and sailing along the Saskatchewan, out through Lake Winnipeg up the Hayes, and out through Hudson Bay. He actually did build a boat and ended up dragging it in three portions from his homestead to the Saskatchewan River. He never made it. It ended up spread over 26 kilometres, and his neighbours ended up committing him to an asylum, where he died a couple of years later. It’s very tragic.”

What drove the filmmaking couple to embrace such a heart wrenching story?

“We were really captivated by the image of a man dragging this boat across the prairie,” says Mortin. “In my mind’s eye, I saw it at full sail, drifting across the sea of sand. It was a very surreal image, and that image then took on huge metaphoric value for Patricia and me. As we developed it and thought about the story, it took on a lot of very personal layers. For me, there has to be a personal connection. I have to see myself in it somewhere, and that’s what I was interested in with the story of *Mad Ship*.”

“We thought about that moment, and what kind of back story would lead a man to that moment – not purely out of madness, but out of real motivation. A sane man in an insane situation was the way that we approached the story, the idea of it being out of love, out of grief, out of a sense of atonement. We built the story from there.”

Fogliato relates the idea to the notion of Canadian identity, and the people who chose to come and settle in Canada: “We’ve always had an interest in the immigrant story. Several of our documentaries are based on that theme, and that’s true of *Mad Ship* as well.”

“It’s very much about the immigrant story and the emotional journey that someone goes on when they emigrate from one place to another. Especially the idea that, before you leave to go somewhere new, that new place always seems so golden, and then you get there and you look back at where you came from, and the old place now seems like heaven because you’re mired in hardships in the new place and it never ended up being exactly what you thought it was going to be. So that always makes the other place seem better.”

“My parents were immigrants. They came from Italy in the late ‘40s so I grew up hearing all about their experiences, and my grandparent’s experiences, and the whole Italian Canadian community in Toronto. And since David and I have been together since we were really young, he was exposed to it as well, so we both had an interest in that.”

Mortin believes it’s important to tell stories that are truly Canadian: “On a more cultural level, I’m really interested in mythologies and mythologizing aspects of our history and our landscape. It’s something that I’d like to see more of in Canadian films – the treatment of Canadian history, and the treatment of really interesting Canadian characters. I think every culture needs a great sense of mythologizing, and certainly the story of *Mad Ship* presented that opportunity.”

“Movies have a great power to mythologize, and I see it as an important part of creating depth to Canadian culture. We’ve got great, larger-than-life characters in our history, but I think we tend to approach them with too much earnestness. *Mad Ship* ties very directly into Canada’s story of immigration, which is a central theme to our national identity. And I hope it explores that theme in a refreshingly engaging and dramatic way.”

SHAPING THE STORY

It took Mortin and Fogliato six years of back-and-forth between them to create the story of *Mad Ship*. During that time, a shift took place in the psyche of society, which proved fortuitous to the filmmakers.

“It was interesting developing the story because three or four years ago, people reacted to the story like, who wants to hear about the Great Depression? There was no interest in that,” says Mortin. “And then the world changed very dramatically in terms of economics, and a greater sense of environmental change and climatic change, with drought suddenly becoming a major issue again for many places in the world.”

“Suddenly, within the past couple of years, there’s been a lot more talk about the Great Depression, and a lot more thematic connections and associations being made to that period. This seemed to make the story of *Mad Ship* all the more relevant, and I think that’s why we were able to have the chance to make it.”

Armed with a compelling image, a changing world, and creative ambition, Mortin and Fogliato turned the idea of *Mad Ship* into a story that came to encapsulate so much meaning: “I would call *Mad Ship* a romantic tragedy that captures a sense of the immigrant experience in Canada,” says Mortin.

“It’s a larger-than-life story of mental and physical survival, set in a big landscape, making it also something of a Canadian prairie ‘Western’. It’s the story of a very passionate man who goes temporarily mad with grief over the death of his wife, and embarks on a Quixotic mission in an attempt to right the wrong he has done her. It’s about a bond of love that exists for a young couple even beyond death. That’s really central to the film, the bond that keeps the couple together.

“I’m also really intrigued by the mixed-up morality within the story – a good person doing the wrong thing for the right reason, or the right thing for the wrong reason, or a sane man’s response to a world that’s gone insane, or that Tomas’s mad behaviour feels emotionally correct. It’s a strong catharsis.”

Fogliato likens the mixed morality as a sense of desperation that was all too common during the Great Depression.

“I think that given the right set of circumstances or the wrong set of circumstances that anybody could be brought to do almost anything. No one character is black or white or good or bad, everyone has both in them. Sometimes good people do bad things, and bad people do good things. It’s about people being caught in a set of circumstances during the Depression and the drought that were so difficult for people.

“Families tried to commit suicide, those kinds of things really did happen. It was very common for men to just disappear, go jump off a bridge and drown themselves. People just didn’t know what to do, how to survive. They didn’t have the kind of safety nets that we have today. And I think a lot of people just gave up, and gave in, and didn’t know how to handle it.

“In a way, *Mad Ship* is about the burden of dreams because Tomas has this big dream, and even when things start to go bad for him and ultimately work out in the most tragic possible way, he can’t let go of that. He has to be true to that dream.

“So I think there is also a lot of hope and beauty in the film. The couple, Tomas and Solveig, their relationship is so solid and so strong. I think there is a lot of beauty in their love for each other and in their love for their children, and in their hopes and in their dream. I think that ultimately even if they failed, the fact that they had their dream and that they tried to achieve it is really beautiful.”

Through the process of developing the story, Mortin found that he became emotionally involved with it, and could imagine himself in the same situation as Tomas.

“I’m really drawn to stories that I relate to as an exaggeration of some aspect of my own emotional experience. I really relate to *Mad Ship* as a kind of nightmare fantasy, of going through the dark tunnel of imagining the destruction of my own family, all the extreme, black emotions I would feel if all my dreams failed and as a direct result something tragic happened to Patricia – if our lives just completely fell apart in this way. I can imagine I’d go mad, and I’d feel compelled to do something extreme, possibly destructive.

“The other aspect of *Mad Ship* is that it’s a story about adult relationships, about marriage. For Patricia and I to have written it together, there’s a lot that we’re expressing about our sense of our relationship, and about the stresses that marriages go through, and the way that people cope or don’t cope. For me, there’s a great expression of love in the script in, in terms of that’s what I would do for Patricia. I would drag a boat through a desert for her, that’s how I feel.”

CHOOSING THE CAST

In order to bring the story to life, Mortin and Fogliato needed to find the right cast compelling enough to play the complex characters convincingly. Danish actor Nikolaj Lie Kaas was chosen to play Tomas, and Mortin believes he was the perfect choice.

“Nikolaj is like a force of nature, he’s just got that kind of energy. On screen he’s got a charisma that fills up the frame immediately. It’s that wonderful mix of personality and charisma that makes him an ideal kind of leading man, in that kind of traditional romantic Hollywood way. He almost bursts right out of the frame at you. That incredible energy that he has within the context of the story goes from passion to mania, to such a deep demonstration of love and devotion. He’s just remarkable.”

Fogliato says they watched several Scandinavian films that Nikolaj performed in, and had no question he was their Tomas.

“Nikolaj has this incredible natural quality about him in all of the little things that he does to bring the character to life, and a quiet intensity that I find really interesting. When he’s in front of the camera, you’re so totally drawn in to him. We were really struck by that intensity, and also by a masculine quality about him that we thought was really important for this character. He brings to the role that kind of strong, silent, quiet masculinity.”

Nikolaj welcomed playing the role of Tomas because of the connection between the two main characters, Tomas and Solveig.

“I like the classic story with a twist. The story about two people going to seek their dreams in the promised land, you’ve heard about the story before. But in this situation, people were struggling with just coping with the every day and trying not to die of hunger and not to have their kids die of hunger, so everything was just a struggle. There was no time to think about ‘do we love each other’. And actually, this couple had this glue keeping them together that was much more important to them than anything else. Their affection for each other is so strong.”

Line Verndal from Norway was selected to play Solveig, because of the totality of what she brought to the character.

“Line is an embodiment of grace and beauty and elegance, and quiet deep emotion. She’s absolutely lovely to watch, and she’s also a very intense actor in a different way than Nikolaj but just as forceful,” says Mortin.

“Line approaches things very seriously, and is really quite wonderful for the role. We had a sense of her back story as coming from a more wealthy class than Tomas, that she was cultured and educated, and sacrificed a lot to come here. She carried that idea throughout, just through her presence. She’s incredibly watch-able, and every moment she’s on the screen you’re captivated by her presence.”

Fogliato concurs that the award-winning actress is very compelling and convincing in the role of Solveig: “Line has a lovely kind of graceful quality about her and is very feminine. We had seen her in a film called *Limbo* that premiered last year in various film festivals, and she actually won an Amanda Award, which like the Norwegian Genies, for best actress for this role.

“She was so strong in the role, and it had some similarities to the role of Solveig in terms of having a vulnerability and a femininity, but also a strength. Solveig had to be someone who didn’t come across as a victim. It was really important that she be feminine and yet at the same time strong, that she made this decision to come with him, he didn’t drag her along. She chose to do this, and she stays ultimately because she wants to be with him and because she wants to keep the family together. So I felt that our actress needed to be able to convey that strength, and Line definitely does that.”

When Line read the script it truly moved her, and resonated with her sense of romanticism: It's such a wonderful story, a beautiful love story. I'm a romantic I guess, and I just love the bond between the two characters, how they love each other despite everything that's going on. Despite everything that's difficult, they just stay together, no question about it. It was really touching, and when I read the script I cried, it was really emotional.

"When you walk out of the movie theatre, I think this film will make you want to take care of the people that you love. And that's a good thing."

Gil Bellows was cast in the role of Cameron, and brought much more to the character than Mortin had expected.

"Gil is incredibly subtle and layered, and deep and thoughtful. He's playing who would ostensibly be the villain in the film, and he was such an incredible advocate for the character in terms of seeing the story and seeing the script from Cameron's point of view in a way that surprised me even as the writer of the character.

"It's his remarkable insight into what would make a man like Cameron tick from the inside out. So I just found a remarkable learning experience for myself to be able to work with him because he is so true and loyal to the character. The Cameron that he created was much more complex, more real, and more human than I had even imagined."

Says Fogliato about Gil Bellows: "The thing that I find really interesting with Gil is that he's really bringing a lot more humanity and complexity to the character.

"I'm really glad that we chose Gil and that he was interested in doing the role because there's a gentleness he brings that really surprised me. And I think that the audience will have more complex feelings for the character of Cameron than I first thought. I think I was expecting people to maybe feel more ambivalent about him, but I think he has created a character that is a lot more likeable, and harder to hate him for what he does."

Gil was quite familiar with the Great Depression era before working on the film: "I have some Walker Evans photographs at home, one of the famous photographers who captured that time, the dust bowls, and the cities. And some of my favourite literature takes place in that era or around that era. The history of that time I think is very interesting for a number of reasons. It's the eve of World War II, and it's a time of great unrest. So I had sense a pretty good sense of it.

"I thought *Mad Ship* was a beautiful and sad love story, alongside what was going on historically at the time. I feel to some degree the relevance of how that intersects with today. How people who build their dreams together can be upended up by forces greater than themselves, and how the world in business and nature conspired to undo someone's dreams."

Gage Munroe from Toronto was chosen to play Tomas and Solveig's son Petter. Despite his young age, he brought an unexpected depth to the role, according to Mortin: "Gage demonstrated so much maturity, and was so watchful and observant, that I recognized Petter in him immediately.

"With kids it's always a leap of faith, and the way that he came through, I'm still in awe of him – as is Nikolaj and Line and Gil. They all said that they felt raised in their scenes with him because he is such a remarkable young actor. He can be a kid joking around and having fun one second, and then the camera roles and he's there, totally in the moment, totally focused. He has that ability to bring forth all of those emotions immediately. For a 12-year-old boy, he's very experienced. He is an incredibly mature young man, like a very old soul in this young boy's body. That was a real gift."

Playing Petter's sister Liv is Lane Styles, a young girl from Winnipeg who had never been on a movie set before: "Lane happened to hear about the auditions and came in literally at the last audition of the last session," explains Mortin.

"We were just totally shocked and blown away because, first of all, she's heartbreakingly sweet and lovely. And yet she had this incredible focus, and could hold that focus for such a long period. She also had a remarkable ability to listen and to understand. I could talk to her in a very adult way, and talk to her about emotional things, and about the situation, and she understood. She was then able to absorb that and gave us so much to work with. What's amazing about her, too, is those big blue eyes and just how wonderfully they play in all the expressiveness that she has on her face. She is definitely another very fortuitous find."

Rachel Blanchard plays Adeline, and found that *Mad Ship* presented an opportunity to learn about an era she didn't know too much about.

"I wanted to be involved in *Mad Ship* because I found the story really touching. I found it different from the scripts I'd been reading, and I love the time period of the '30s. I hadn't really explored it much before, and I love learning about new eras. So I hadn't played a character in the '30s before. There's something about the desperation of that period and the obstacles that people had to get past that I find really inspiring and interesting and tragic."

Aidan Devine plays Adeline's husband Edmund, and he found a lot of meaning in the story of *Mad Ship*: "The script is beautiful, and it's unusual. It's kind of sparse, but it's very deep. There are a lot of intricate emotional heaviness in bits and pieces of it, and overall it just makes you think. You can see beauty in sort of a bad situation, which is an unusual thing when you're reading a script. It changes your perspective on the world a little bit, which, I think, as an artist that's what you're trying to do.

"I think there's redemption for just about every character. They're all identifiable with by regular human beings, and you feel for each of them. They're all despicable in some way, and that becomes more apparent throughout, the despicable nature of each of the characters. But then by the end, each one of them has had some redemption. Each one of them represents every basic human being. Human beings are all just mirrors of each other, that's what we do.

"It's not human to be perfectly nice every day. And in every character in this script, is the ability to show that little bit of despicableness. So that is one of the most beautiful things."

SELECTING THE LANDSCAPES

While *Mad Ship* is set primarily in Canada during the Great Depression, there are scenes in the film that show Tomas and Solveig in Norway before they emigrate. Had Mortin and Fogliato gone with their original backstory, the couple would have been from Finland.

"The initial idea that became our story was about a Finnish man who lived on the Canadian prairie, so naturally we developed the backstory about a young couple who came from Finland," explains Fogliato.

"During the time we were looking for producing partners, a Norwegian funder approached us who really liked the story, and he said "You know, what you've described to me, this character, he's Norwegian, he's not Finnish. This is something that only a Norwegian could do." He told us that along the northern coast of Norway there's this whole culture of fisheries and boat building, and he said that this kind of stubborn quality that this man has, it would only happen in Norway. And he convinced us that that the character had to be Norwegian. Since it was only loosely based on a true story that, that didn't seem to be too much of a stretch to change that."

To kick off production, Mortin and Fogliato shot two days in Norway – the homeland of Tomas and Solveig, and a lush landscape that would contrast the look of the prairies during the Great Depression.

“Norway has shades of greens and blues, and this jagged coastline of the fjords and the ocean. And I think it’s a really interesting juxtaposition, to see Tomas and Solveig together in that setting,” says Fogliato.

“I think that by showing this landscape close to the beginning of the film, you know that’s what inside these characters’ heads. It’s part of who you are, wherever you were born. And I think in your mind you always go back there, and you hold that inside you. That’s something that I’ve learned from my parents, and from other immigrants, that where you come from becomes part of you. It becomes a place that you go to in your mind.

“So when you see Tomas and Solveig out in the stark prairie, you know what their inner landscape looks like, and you know how out of place they are. Just how literally they’re like fish out of water. So we were really lucky to be able to film in Norway.”

Opposite of the lush coastal setting of Norway would be the dry and dismal desert-like conditions of the Great Depression. But it couldn’t be shot just anywhere, because when it comes to making a movie, there is a lot of frame to consider.

“A feature film has a very big screen, and you want to fill it with big images and big emotions and big characters. We knew that we wanted to make something that was very big – big landscapes, big skies, big story, big characters – and that drove our decision about where to shoot the film,” says Mortin.

“We brought the project to Manitoba because we wanted to work with Buffalo Gal Pictures, who have a great reputation nationally and internationally. Manitoba Film and Music is a fantastic agency to work with, and they greeted the project with incredible enthusiasm.”

When Liz Jarvis of Buffalo Gal Pictures heard about *Mad Ship* and read the script, she knew it was exactly the kind of Canadian story she wanted to be involved with: “I think the story of *Mad Ship* resonates with me because I feel quite close to the land and people that inspired it.

“I’ve always been fascinated by the incredible tales of hardship and madness that surface when we tell stories of survival in the Canadian wilderness and the settling of the prairie. Patricia and David’s script added the drama of a great romance, and their vision and passion for the film was clear.

“That passion and clarity, and perhaps that pioneer legacy, inspired the crew to come through with some outstanding work – and that’s what makes me most happy to have been a part of it. It’s been a joy to watch David, Patricia, and everyone, create a beautiful thing.”

David was also impressed by the crew that would help bring his film to life: “Winnipeg also has extremely experienced, high calibre film crews, who approached the project with tremendous energy and creative drive. They were all very excited to work on a period film that has more than its share of creative and technical challenges.

“Patricia and I were astounded by the miracles they managed to pull off on a daily basis, given the very finite resources of a low budget production. Manitoba also provided remarkable landscapes, and we found our primary location about an hour and half outside of Winnipeg.

“One thing that was very important for the farmstead was that we have a completely pristine, clear horizon, which is a difficult thing to find now. The open prairie that would have existed in the ‘20s and ‘30s doesn’t exist anymore, because of everything from mature tree shelters to wind turbines and hydro towers and grain elevators, and all sorts of things that dot the horizon. And of course on the prairie you can see forever, so all these things are popping up on the landscape.

“When we got to the area just outside of Carman, we saw those beautiful rolling contoured hills and all the opportunity for clean horizon line that they presented. The way that the sky and the horizon met was really crucial, and we found that beautifully in Manitoba – beautiful light, beautiful twilights, amazing sunsets, and such a grand scale in the landscape. It was unlike anything I’ve seen elsewhere.

“We had to create the effect of a summer drought, so we treated the colour palette with a lot of yellows and browns that suggested a dusty dryness. We created a period look through de-saturation. A very shadowed foreground cut out against a bright background was something we were always looking for, to create a real sense of period through that style of photography.

“We also employed a lot of hand-held shooting, partly to give more of a frenetic feel to some of the dramatic scenes, especially in depicting Tomas’s madness, where his explosive energy should feel difficult to contain within the frame. We also felt that it would be a surprising choice for a period film, giving it a bit more of a contemporary visual style, and providing a greater contrast between the hand-held dramatic scenes and the more elegant compositions of the landscapes.”

FOUR WEEKS TO BUILD A FARM

Once Mortin and Fogliato found the rolling contoured landscape, they began searching for the farm within the area. But that proved an even bigger challenge, say Mortin.

“We originally thought it would be a relatively simple thing to find an old farmstead surrounded by a pristine prairie horizon. But this was next to impossible, as most old homesteads were now surrounded by dense trees that were planted as wind breaks, or they were so run-down that it would be too expensive to bring them back up to a decent state for shooting, and to make it safe for the crew. On top of all that, Tomas literally tears down the house in the last act. So we discovered we would have to build the house and the barn, which we had not budgeted for.”

Fogliato continues: “The farmstead, consisting of a house and a barn, had to be built in four weeks. We didn’t have a lot of time, because we were backed up against the wall in terms of the weather. We were shooting until the end of October, and from what I’m told, the first snow storm typically happens in Manitoba around Halloween, so we knew that we couldn’t push it any later than that without running into potential weather problems. We had to do it quickly.”

Winnipeg-based Production Designer Réjean Labrie and his art department were responsible for racing against the clock to create the farmstead. “We went through a lot of versions of the barn and the house and how it should look. We had about ten different drawings and it always kept changing, and we also had to adapt to the budget. But everybody was really excited about the idea of building it.”

Mortin explains that even after they went decided to build the farmstead, it still wasn’t an easy ride: “To complicate things further, we chose for the farm location what is said to be the windiest spot in Manitoba – and probably one of the windiest places in the entire country. So the construction crew was constantly battling gale-force winds, and in a few instances watched as entire sheets of plywood were lifted from the ground and hurled across the field by the wind.”

Labrie further describes the wind challenges his department was faced with: “Some days the carpenters couldn’t even move a sheet of plywood because it would just get carried away by the wind. It was like 70 to 80 kilometer per hour winds, and that made it dangerous to work out there. But in the end the construction crew was very proud of what we achieved and how it looked, because fifty per cent of the movie takes place on the farm. So despite all the challenges of building it, it looked beautiful when we started. And then of course it all gets destroyed.”

In the film, as Tomas descends into madness, he cannibalizes the house – one board at a time – to build his ship. For Labrie, this was particularly tough to watch.

“It’s sad because you build this beautiful farmhouse, and then the majority of the house gets ripped apart. The wood siding gets used by our main character to build the boat, so there’s a progression of him literally ripping the wood away, to the point where you see the furniture through it, and you see some of the bedroom upstairs. So there were all the logistics of taking apart the house, and we had to keep the material light for him to be able to take it apart. And then we had to paint the boat so that wood would look like the same wood that came from the house.”

Mortin and Fogliato were more than pleased with the work done by Labrie and his team, says Fogliato: “We were really happy with the farm, because the farm is the heart of the film. The farm represents the family. It represents everything that both Tomas and Solveig dreamed of. And the landscape and the house and everything, it really just captured what I had in my head, and in my imagination.”

RECREATING THE DEPRESSION

It’s no easy task recreating the look of the Great Depression, and it all starts with research.

“The first thing I did was go to the library to find books about the Depression. There are a lot of great resources in the library, and archives, and also online. The Glenbow in Calgary in particular has a lot of pictures of farmlands and also the cities during that period,” says Labrie.

One of his tasks was preparing the fields surrounding the farmhouse to look like an authentic Depression-era landscape: “The ground consisted of very short wheat, so that was what we started out with. Through the movie we worked the ground to become even more dry, by moving the soils and adding sand to it.

“Beyond the farm, there were aspects of the movie that take place in town and in the city. We had to find a bank location, because the character of Cameron is a banker. We found a location in the town of Selkirk, and we went there dressed it up with period cars and the proper doors and windows.

“In downtown Winnipeg we had to dress a back lane, to look like a kind of shantytown. We also had to recreate other scenes in the city – like a scene where we see people begging, looking for jobs, or trying to sell apples, or having cars that they can’t drive anymore because they don’t have money to put in gas. We had to research the cars, too.

“In Manitoba we used lots of the earthy and ochre colours. Also, I wanted to have a lot of sun reflection, so we didn’t use very many dark colours. Inside the rooms of the house there are a lot of light tones, like white and sand colours that reflect light and give the DP Mike Marshall lots of opportunity to bounce lights.

“We put a little touch of green here and there, because green was associated with the banker. Money is green, and money represents wealth. Cameron the banker is the only one that still has any kind of money in the movie. His car was green, and in his house we had some greens in the curtains and all of that. The few touches of green in the movie really stand out.”

DUST IN THE WIND

The Great Depression era was known for dusty and dry conditions. One of the biggest events of the film was the dust storm, which proved a major undertaking, says Mortin.

“The dust storm was very elaborate and difficult to shoot, and a huge challenge for sure. We had huge fans blowing dust around and creating a wind storm. And of course it was difficult for the actors because it was actual dust being blown at them. It was very clean – I think it was some sort of edible chicken meal

or something like that so there was nothing toxic or harmful – but still, they had to be in the situation of a very forceful wind and stuff blowing in their face, and getting in their eyes and mouth and nose. And it was very difficult to communicate over the roar of the huge fans that were used to create the storm, so it was a very uncomfortable shoot that day.

“The crew looked like survivors from a futuristic apocalypse, sporting goggles and face masks and covered in dust. But all the intensity and discomfort yielded a highly-charged atmosphere on set, and everyone ended the night feeling excited and with a major sense of accomplishment.”

Réjean Labrie explains some of the techniques used by the crew to replicate a dust storm.

“When you do a dust storm like this, you have to use products that are not dangerous for the actors. You can’t just take sand and spray it in the air because you actually have actors going through that, so we took a lot of time to research what was the safest product. We used products from chickens that even if you swallow it or get it in your eyes it’s still organic and safe. I know that in some of the scenes with the main characters where there was lots of wind, they had to shoot the scenes from behind because the character Tomas had to wear goggles to protect him from the wind.

“I put a lot of curtains that could flow with the wind. And there’s a scene where his wife, Solveig, goes around and closes the windows and puts a wet towel on the ledge to protect them from the sand coming in. So you kind of start out with a normal house and as you go further into the movie there’s a sense of them becoming more and more exposed to the elements, with wind coming in through the cracks and underneath the doors.

“The sand affects everything, their lifestyle, and their dreams, and it destroys all they had. In the end the whole house has been exposed and the people have lost everything.”

THE MADNESS OF THE SHIP

Another big technical challenge was building and dealing with the ship. As its base was an 800-pound replica of a Manitoba York boat that proved a lucky find for Réjean Labrie.

“If you go further up north in Manitoba to Norway House you can find actual York boats. But someone at Parks Canada told us of a person near the town of Gimli that had a replica boat stored away in his barn, so we took that boat and added to it.

“The movie required a certain kind of ship, so we added a cabin, and made the sides higher, and put in a mast. And as the character gets madder and crazier, he builds his boat from the house, so we wanted to give the feeling that the boat could float, but at the same time there was a craziness about it. And our painter did a fabulous job painting the boat to look like the boards from the house.

“Finding that boat, then bringing it from the farmer’s barn in Gimli to our studio in Winnipeg, and then building it up and then transporting it an hour-and-a-half away from Winnipeg was a pretty surreal experience.

“And then there were the logistics of the character Tomas having to be able to pull that boat, so we had to figure out how he would do that. We found an old wagon with steel wheels that we fabricated into a kind of base for the boat. We had to fabricate that well and make sure it was safe for the actor and crew to be able to. So it became quite the wagon, and quite the boat.”

Mortin further explains why the ship was such a challenge: “Using a York boat for the base was massively heavy to begin with, and then we built onto that. In total, the ship ended up weighing over a tonne. So then there was the whole question of how we would move it through these really difficult rugged landscapes and terrains. It was a big technical issue that we had to grapple with.

“We were able to sort it out through brute force mainly. We often had four or five guys pushing the boat from the rear, while the camera operators artfully framed out their legs and feet. We also had rigs with trucks and ATVs and that sort of thing. So those were the major technical troubles that we were facing. Anything involving the boat became a major ordeal.”

MUSIC AND METAPHORS

The backstory of Solveig depicts a cultured and educated woman who emigrated from Norway with the man she was madly in love with. Throughout the film, the filmmakers had to maintain this sense of cultured-ness in her, and show that she had just a little bit of a different background than Tomas. They succeeded in doing this through the use of a reoccurring prop – a gramophone.

“We needed a gramophone and we actually needed to find more than one because you see the gramophone in the house, you see it taken away by the banker, you see it in a general store, and you see it travelling on the boat in the prairies. You always need to have more than one when it’s a key prop like that.

“We needed a specific model that’s from the 1910’s era, and we wanted it to be fairly ornate because it’s from Europe. But actual gramophones like that go for really big prices. So we found a couple of fairly good replicas but they were not quite right. We added some colour and painted them green, and added some pictures of Norway on it because it had to look more European. They turned out great.”

Mortin describes why the gramophone holds so much significance to the story.

“The gramophone kind of came to symbolize that cultured and educated aspect of her soul, and the feeling she retained about her homeland. At one point, Cameron refers to the gramophone as being very rare and very European, and in a way he’s talking about Solveig.

“The music that she’s listening to on the gramophone, the one treasure she was able to actually bring with her from Norway, reflects her sense of culture. She plays Kirsten Flagstad, Norway’s great operatic soprano from the early 1900s through to the 1960s. Flagstad is a cultural hero to Norway, and she did early gramophone recordings, singing arias from Grieg’s Peer Gynt.

“So there are all of those cultural references back to Solveig’s homeland as well, and reflecting that push-and-pull of the immigrant experience. You always dream of the new land and that’s the heaven that you’re seeking, but once you’re there it becomes the hell that you’re living and the homeland is the heaven that you’ve left, so all of that is kind of embodied in the gramophone.”

Adds Fogliato: “Tomas is so charismatic and so charming that he sweeps her off her feet, and she chooses a life of hard work and poverty over the comfortable life that her father had intended for her. So we felt that the gramophone really symbolized her background, and the fact she had a much more privileged upbringing than Tomas did.

“So the gramophone in a sense represents her privileged background and her education and her sophistication and love of music, but it also represents what she left behind and what she gave up. And I think that’s an important thing in terms of their relationship, that in a sense, the gramophone is something that sometimes comes between them.”

Line Vernal also found a lot of meaning in the gramophone and what it meant to her character Solveig.

“It is very symbolic actually. It’s the symbol of everything at home that she misses. It’s the culture, the music, because she’s a person who used to listen to music and read and go to the theatre and all of this that she doesn’t have anymore. The gramophone is the last thing that she has from home that really kind

of takes her back, and it's very cherished. She loves it. It's a part of her. The whole role the gramophone plays in the film is so beautiful because it's so devastating.

“First it gets sand all over, so it gets ruined. Then when Tomas sees this, he takes it all apart and takes off all the sand, which is a beautiful symbol of his love for her because he actually hates this music. And then she had to sell it to get money and she doesn't get anything for it because it's not valuable at all here because people need food not gramophones. But then Cameron brings it back.

“So there really are a lot of people involved with this gramophone, and it's a part of her. It's very important to her. Even in the end.”