

ON LOCATION

Grande Ronde Valley to be backdrop of movie production starting in February

BY DICK MASON
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Cinematic history will be made in La Grande early next year. The filming of a movie directed by Los Angeles filmmaker H. Nelson Tracey, “Dumped on Christmas,” is set to start in February 2023 in La Grande.

The film will be about two college students attending school outside Northeastern Oregon. The young couple, Ben and Cassie, are in La Grande during Christmas break where they are visiting Ben’s family. Unfortunately the couple breaks up during the visit, creating an awkward situation for Cassie, who cannot leave La Grande for her parents’ home in Illinois for logistical reasons. This leaves the two students stuck in the same house during a portion of the holiday season.

“Xmas becomes ex-mas,” Tracey said.

Tracey believes this will be the first movie made in La Grande that is also set in La Grande. The filmmaker is now in the process of lining up actors and actresses for the film.

“The cast will include several prominent television and movie actors,” he said.

The director said he is close to renting a home in La Grande where a significant portion of “Dumped on Christmas” will be shot. The film’s producers will be filmmaker Rafi Jacobs, of Los Angeles, and Stephen Mastrocola, of Simi Valley, California, who stressed that members of the La Grande community will have many opportunities to assist with the making of the film.

“We will be inviting the community to be a part of the making of the film,” said Mastrocola, who has helped produce movies such as the award-winning “Wine Club” and written for the TV series “Simi Valley.”

The screenplay

Tracey became interested in making a movie in La Grande during his visits to the annual Eastern Oregon Film Festival. He started coming to the festival four years ago at the invitation of its director, Chris Jennings. Tracey was struck by the unique beauty of the Grande Ronde Valley.

“I want people to see it in the movie, many of whom will never come here,” said Tracey, who is best known for directing the award-winning “Picture Jasper” and “Conspiracy Party.”

Tracey writes of the Grande Ronde Valley’s beauty in his screenplay for “Dumped on Christmas,” but he said it is hard to do it justice.

“There is only so much you can capture on paper,” he said during this year’s Eastern Oregon Film Festival, held over the past weekend, Oct. 20-22, in La Grande.

Tracey’s screenplay was read on Friday, Oct. 21, at Eastern Oregon University’s Schwarz Theatre by a cast of eight. The Eastern Oregon Film Festival event was the first time the screenplay had been read together by a full cast, and it was its initial public reading.

Jocelyn Berado, an actress and La Grande native, who portrayed Cassie, said she felt like she was giving birth to her character.



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Participants in a screenplay reading for the movie “Dumped on Christmas” talk following the event on Friday, Oct. 21, 2022, at Schwarz Theatre at Eastern Oregon University, La Grande. The reading was part of the Eastern Oregon Film Festival. The screenplay readers shown are, from left, Garrett Detrixhe, Jocelyn Berado, Rikki Hickey and Nicholas Vece.

“This was the first time anyone had portrayed her,” she said.

Those also participating in the screenplay reading were local residents Sarah Fischer and Rikki Hickey; EOU students Nicholas Vece, Logan Flynn and Moses McAnich; and visiting filmmakers Garrett Detrixhe and Patrick Rahill.

Tracey said in some cases dialogue that sounded natural in his mind when he wrote it did not sound natural when it was spoken, inspiring him to go back and make changes in the screenplay, which remains fluid at this point, just like its characters.

“The script and the characters are evolving at the same time,” Berado said.

The film festival

Tracey’s screenplay was conceived in conjunction with the EOFF’s inaugural Eastern Oregon Filmmaker Residency, in May 2021. He was one of six participants who spent a month in La Grande writing and developing feature-length screenplays with local production in mind.

The screenplay reading was one of more than 30 events people could attend during the 2022 Eastern Oregon Film Festival, including the showing of 32 films ranging in length from 10 to 100 minutes. All were completed this year or in 2021 and were shown at the Liberty Theatre, the Lodge at Hot Lake

Springs, Schwarz Theatre and McKenzie Theatre at EOU.

Jennings said attendance at this year’s EOFF has not been tabulated yet, but he said it is continuing to come back after taking a hit during the COVID-19 pandemic. He believes that attendance levels will turn out to be almost what they were before the pandemic hit in 2020.

See, Movie/Page A6



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Rikki Hickey, left, Nicholas Vece, center, and Sarah Fischer relax after participating in a reading of the screenplay for the movie “Dumped on Christmas” on Friday, Oct. 21, 2022, at Schwarz Theatre at Eastern Oregon University, La Grande. The reading was conducted as part of the Eastern Oregon Film Festival.

Movie

Continued from A1

“We are rebounding,” he said.

Four months ago, the Eastern Oregon Film Festival was named one of MovieMaker’s 25 Coolest Film Festivals of 2022. The annual list recognizes festivals that go out of their way to be innovative and welcoming.

Jennings said the recognition reflects nominations by film directors. He said filmmakers are drawn to EOFF because the festival makes it possible for them to

come together, exchange ideas and make connections.

“You are working to make films happen,” he said. “It is not about competition. It is about engaging in conversation.”

Sarah Wells, of Portland, the director of “My Dad Gets a Smartphone,” a work shown at the film festival, agrees.

“It is so special. I really love the whole experience,” she said of the Eastern Oregon Film Festival. “It brings us together so that we can celebrate each other.”