

"Wellness" is filmed in Warren

By Lauren Vokish

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How can one man come close to losing everything to a world that does not exist, but keep his faith through it all?

This is the question challenged by Jake Mahaffy in his independent film "Wellness."

"Wellness" premiered worldwide at the 2008 International Tiger Competition at Rotterdam in early February and took the Grand Jury Prize in the Dramatic Competition at SXSW, an Independent Film Festival held in Austin, Texas, at the end of the month, (March 08).

The film, which was taped entirely in Warren County and also had a complete Warren cast, was his follow-up film to the award winning feature film "War," which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2004.

An Ohio native Mahaffy started out with film making at the Rhode Island School of Design and then studied at the Russian State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow. Mahaffy also has received several awards such as being named one of Filmmaker's Magazine's "new faces of independent film" for Free In Deed, Rockefeller Media Arts Fellowship, Guggenheim Fellowship, Creative Capital Grant and the Sundance Institute's Inaugural Lynn Auerbach Screenwriting Fellowship after developing a project at the 2006 Sundance Filmmaker's Labs. He co-founded "Hand Cranked Film Projects" in Boston, Mass., where he currently is developing a new film making curriculum at Wheaton College as an associate professor.

His latest independent feature takes on what most filmmakers may never have the guts to do. Mahaffy made the film completely without a crew, just his own handheld microphone and camera, with the untrained actors in unscripted scenes. "A film like this is made to create a world, to create a self-sufficient reality," said Mahaffy. "It isn't about telling a story or making a point or teaching anybody a lesson. It's really up to any given viewer to see and feel as much as they are able."

The narrative film is about a dejected man named Thomas Lindsey and his preparation for an investment seminar for the Wellness Corporation in an old Pennsylvania town. By the end of the three day seminar he spends all the money he has and has not received anything in return.

"I wanted to show a man investing everything he owns in a product that doesn't exist, said Mahaffy." As his life falls apart around him he still believes in the scam without any evidence of its validity and he really wants other people to buy into it with him. Within the scam the more he tries to succeed the more he loses in the end."

Mahaffy began in January of 2006 when he came to Warren County in search of a friend, Jeff Clark, whom he had previously worked with in "War."

"Jeff was truly willing and that's all it takes, to give everything to a role," said Mahaffy. "Jeff was the co-producer for the film as well. Making the phone calls, getting spaces to shoot, calling his friend to appear in the scenes." Mahaffy said there were some actors in the film who might have had some stage background, but none of them were professional. But that only enhanced the quality of the

film. "These are some of the greatest performances ever," said Mahaffy. "It is so good; it doesn't even look like acting." The film, Mahaffy said, is "brutally anti-visual and un-cinematic."

"I focused on the actors' performances and the 'audio truth' of their dialogue more than the compositions," said Mahaffy. "Much of the camera work was done to provide edit points for the unrepeatable, spontaneous and single camera scenes." Most all of the scenes were improv and done on-site with Warren residents at home or at work, said Mahaffy. "We shot over about 14 to 20 days total, but it was over the course of two years," said Mahaffy. "So I would shoot for five days in Warren, then go home and edit for a few months and come back again for five days the following fall to shoot new scenes and re-shoot others."

Clark, a lifetime resident of Warren and a recreation therapist at Warren State Hospital, said playing Thomas Lindsey was something completely new and different for him. "Lindsey was a brand new character, but a lot of me came through, said Clark. "I was basically following great direction and responding to situation Jake placed us in. As the filming went on, I did find myself empathizing with Thomas and worrying a bit about his wife."

One of the other main actors in the film was Mahaffy's father, Paul, who is also a native of Warren. He plays Business Unit Manager Paul Stubbs and challenged Clark to go beyond where he thought he couldn't go as an actor. "Paul Mahaffy is one amazing guy. He was so real. He made me respond. I had no choice," said Clark. "I babbled and trembled when he ripped into Thomas Lindsey. I wasn't Thomas so much as I was myself when Paul got into his part. He was intense and his scenes are too."

Both Mahaffy and Clark said it was great to have nearly an all Warren cast. "Our city played its own roles and our city is quite the actor," said Clark. "We, the city of Warren, got some great reviews. Warren businesses really opened their hearts to the film as well."

Clark says that it has been a constant learning experience making films with Mahaffy. "It's like a college course or an intense crash course in film making, like an acting class, like having a life coach with you or your own personal professor to hang around with and learn from," said Clark. "Jake Mahaffy and his family have been a real blessing in my life. If it stopped right now I'd be a better person because he made me a better person. Clark said Mahaffy has a lot to share and give the world. I'm extremely proud of the small part I've had in his life, the shared time and all I've learned from him," said Clark. He has said that the experience could be described as "unfathomable." "Jake and everyone involved in Wellness made it an award winning film," said Clark. "We all took the viewers to another world for 90 minutes. It's a compelling film that I still wonder about." Mahaffy said that the film would be successful whether or not it won an award. "The film is the same today as it was three months ago before anybody saw it," said Mahaffy. "But anytime people have an open heart and share genuine sympathy with someone who isn't himself it's encouraging just on a basic moral level. And that's the response the film gets from mature audiences."

A date for the Warren showing of Wellness will be announced this summer.