

YEAR OF THE CARNIVORE - Production Notes

Writer/director Sook-Yin Lee first met Producer Trish Dolman of Screen Siren Pictures in 2002, during the production of Trish's first feature, *Flower & Garnet*. Sook-Yin helped out doing cast interviews for the EPK and Dolman was struck by her creative drive. Dolman later read Sook-Yin's script for *Year of the Carnivore*, and they decided to develop the project together. With the support of Telefilm Canada, MovieCentral and COGECO, Lee was able to write the script and develop it into an "anti-romantic" comedy, an exploration of love and sexuality.

"I wanted to write a story that can hit the heart, the head, and the funny bone. Almost like 'chakras,' you gotta hit those levels", says Sook-Yin Lee.

In 2008, with a production ready script, Telefilm's Western Office identified *Carnivore* as a priority project and invested packaging funds. Lee was able to begin preliminary casting for the movie early to search for the young leads with the help of casting directors John Buchan, Jason Knight (*Away from Her*), and Susan Shopmaker (*Shortbus*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*). Producer Dolman also met with Simone Urdl and Jen Weiss of Toronto's Film Farm, producers of the Academy Award nominated *Away From Her*, at Cannes in 2008. They agreed to co-produce *Year of the Carnivore*. Co-producer Kryssta Mills came on board via a British Columbia Film producer internship.

Dolman says, *"It was great to work with Simone and Jen. They brought a wealth of experience and passion to the project, and were able to bring a key piece of financing to the table from the OMDC and Ontario tax credits."*

Sook-Yin came out to BC in the summer of 2008, to scout the colourful locations for the film and continue searching for the right actors to play Sammy and Eugene. At the same time, distributors E1 Films Canada confirmed their support. Later in the summer, after an epic search for the lead actors, New York casting director Susan Shopmaker and her associate Randy- found Broadway actress Cristin Milioti, a rising star in the New York theatre community and also known for her recurring role in the TV series, *The Sopranos*.

Says Lee, *"Sammy goes through a lot of emotional extremes, and it was hard to find an actress that could embody this authentically... Susan showed me 10 different actresses on tape, and my eye immediately went to Cristin Milioti."*

Year of the Carnivore is Cristin's debut in a lead role for a feature film. She describes her character, *"Sammy takes things as they come, and doesn't see herself as a victim. She's childlike but not childish."*

An extensive search to find the right actor for the character of folk musician and indie band guitarist "Eugene," went on for weeks, until Sook-Yin coincidentally ran into Mark Rendall (*Childstar*) in Toronto's Kensington Market. Mark read for the part and "nailed it." Rendall reveals, *"I secretly wanted to be a musician... I've been playing guitar for five years, but could never make a commitment to be in a band, so it was great to get this film because I get to do both."*

Three celebrated Canadian comic actors were also chosen for the film. Sheila McCarthy (*I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*), who plays Mrs. Smalls, describes Sook-Yin as a director: *"She's crystal clear and specific, and has the whole movie in her head very clearly. I love directors like that, because it's going to make a strong film"*. Sook-Yin says of Kevin McDonald (*Kids in the Hall*), who plays Mr. Smalls, *"I grew up watching Kids in the Hall and I'm a big fan of Kevin McDonald."* Comedian Will Sasso's (MADtv) towering demeanour and ability to combine nerd with thug, made him the perfect choice for Dirk.

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Casting directors Corinne Clark and Jennifer Page came on board to help find the Vancouver actors, bringing the total to five casting directors in three different cities to fill all the principal roles. Ali Liebert (Harper's Island) is Sylvia who works with Sammy at Big Apple Food town; Emily Holmes (Nightwatching) and Patrick Gilmore play Sammy's neighbours; and Eugene Lipinski is Eugene's Dad. Newcomer, Linda Uyehara Hoffman is the one non-actor in the ensemble; normally she's the leader of a Japanese Taiko Group, Katari Taiko. As Miss Nakamura, she has the right touch to bring the bed-bound feminist senior citizen to life.

Producer Trish Dolman describes choosing the right cinematographer to shoot the story's unique style, *"Sook-Yin wanted colours that popped and a pop culture sensibility. She looked up Bruce Chun (Bon Cop, Bad Cop) and they clicked. It was great to have such an experienced DP, especially for the music sequences. Bruce has shot so many music videos that it was old hand for him."*

Despite being in the midst of the largest economic crisis in years, production was able to begin in November of 2008, with production financing from Telefilm Canada, E1 Entertainment, MovieCentral, TMN, BC Film, the OMDC and tax credits.

Shooting outside of the Vancouver zone allowed the producers to raise more money for the budget from regional tax credits. An old car dealership in Maple Ridge, BC, Mussallem Motors, proved to be a versatile, cost-effective and unusual location, posing as a veterinary clinic, a police station, Sammy's apartment, Eugene's apartment, and the band's gig space. It fit the film's unique look, and became almost like another character. Dolman says, "We just really lucked out."

For a film that was originally set in the summer, shooting in the fall and early winter proved challenging. The script called for a scene where Sammy and Miss. Nakamura swim in a pool. The crack locations team miraculously found an outdoor pool in Surrey that would allow the crew to re-fill and heat the pool for a shoot day in December! By then, winter had caught up with the movie— the locations department had to melt snow off the road in order for Eugene to double Sammy on his bike; the final kiss scene was shot on one of the coldest days, causing the actors to conceal their shivers in one of the most tender moments in the film. One night extreme weather forced some of the crew to stay overnight in hotels in Maple Ridge because of the icy roads.

Sook-Yin was always up for improvising as a director. During rehearsals, she utilized a technique she learned as a competitive swimmer when Lee's coach walked beside the pool, directing her through her stroke. Sook-Yin walked, "invisibly" with the actors, guiding them when they needed direction. To prepare for the role of Eugene, she wanted actor Mark Rendall to know what it's like to be a street musician, playing songs to apathetic passersby. Sook-Yin directed Mark to stay in character and play his guitar for money on a busy downtown Vancouver street corner. Little did he know, Cristin was also directed to be in character, as Sammy on the first day she introduces herself to Eugene. What followed was a lengthy improvisation of their initial meeting and first "date" together. Their palpable chemistry and connection was immediate. When the extended improv ended, Cristin and Mark broke out of character and introduced themselves to each other. From then on they were close companions, having created a sense memory of their history together to draw upon for the movie.

Another example of spontaneous improvisation occurred during a scene when Eugene attempts to have a threesome at a warehouse party, and is interrupted by a fellow party animal. Sook-Yin decided to turn the intruder into an obnoxious puppeteer banging on Eugene's bedroom window. Turning to producer Trish Dolman wrapped in her winter woollies she enlisted her knit mitts. The wardrobe and props departments sewed on hair and a face, and voilà, puppets were born.

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The original music score was created by Sook-Yin and her long time friends Canuck hip hop artist, MC and turntablist, Buck 65 and Adam Litovitz. She was inspired by the idea of re-imagining the classic Greek chorus by featuring the recurring sound of ethereal voices colliding with a bank of distorted guitars, pings and dings, rattling drums, and midi-keyboards. Together, they fired up their laptop studios and lobbed recordings back and forth to one another until the original score of Year of the Carnivore was complete.

Production wrapped shortly before the holidays in December of 2008.

"The films that I make are also extensions of things that I'm curious about, that I have questions about. I guess I have a lot of questions about love and sexuality, and bodies, and being comfortable with myself and other people". – Writer and Director Sook-Yin Lee.

"Making indie films is challenging these days, but Year of the Carnivore proved that 'if there is a will, there is a way.' Sook-Yin's creative will and a fantastic, dedicated crew made it possible." -- Producer Trish Dolman.

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