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Maine On Screen

Two directors of new Maine films dare to take us below our lovely state's lovely surface.

BY COLIN W. SARGENT

WHAT IS IT about our state that both grounds and floats a film? Mysteries like this keep directors **Maris Curran** (*Five Nights in Maine*, Film Rise, 2016) and **Jared Martin** (*The Congressman*, Shadow Distribution, 2016) awake at night. Both moviemakers have vacationed here, grown up here, sensed something extraordinary here, and marveled at Maine's dreamy surety all their lives. Successfully addressed, our state is a back door to the world's unconscious. In their two striking films this year, each of these directors dares to step through.

INTERVIEW WITH Maris Curran — Director of — **5 NIGHTS IN MAINE**

Watching *Five Nights in Maine*, I was stunned by the levels of estrangement the story explores. It starts with the unreality of Sherwin's losing his wife to a car accident, which puts him into an emotional freefall.

Maris Curran: I think when anybody is taken that quickly and unexpectedly, there's often a sense of *is this real? Is she really gone?*

It seems an even more savage disconnect for him because he wasn't there to witness it.

The fact that he is not present for that and not part of the accident causes the floor to

CINEMA

go out from underneath him. He is suspended and falling at the same time. It's also isolating. Grief can be so isolating. The way we often deal with it in the U.S. is an individualized experience, behind a closed door, one person. I wanted two people to open that door to look at each other.

It's easy to see why David Oyelowo is in such demand. He was fantastic. Not every actor has his interiority. It was so moving to see the world through his eyes.

I was looking for somebody who could convey great depth, interiority, and quiet power in the same moment. And at the same time be a movie star. Not many actors put both of those together. It was clear very quickly to me that David would play Sherwin.

I'd ask you how you could make the silence so loud, and solicitous questions from friends and family (oh, how are you doing?) so devastating, but you've already revealed you were going through something

like that yourself.

The film is not autobiographical, but as a writer-director I was going through a divorce. I knew from my own life what happens when things fall apart in an instant. These aren't parallel stories—their truth doesn't need to be my truth—but there was a common emotional language.

Sherwin's sister (played by Teyonah Parris) says, 'You don't have to accept your mother-in-law (Lucinda's) invitation and visit her in Maine.' Then the film cuts to Sherwin driving there. Can you tell us about that transition?

His wife had just come back from visiting her mother (played by Diane Wiest), who was ill. He gets a call from her inviting him to Maine, which was unexpected. It's against his better judgment that he decides to do it. There is a curiosity there.

To what extent is Maine's remoteness and alien geography a character in this film?

Maine is unbelievably beautiful, rugged in its beauty, a place where you can sense the character finding some kind of power because of that beauty but also a place he can feel really alienated. It's not inviting to

Starring:

David Oyelowo, Dianne Wiest, Rosie Perez

Maine locations: Phippsburg, Brunswick, Cape Elizabeth High School, and South Portland.

Synopsis:

After his wife's tragic death, a man goes to rural Maine to visit his mother-in-law.

2015 Toronto International Film Festival - World Premiere,
2016 Palm Springs International Film Festival - Official Selection
2016 Cleveland International Film Festival - Official Selection
2016 Sarasota Film Festival - Official Selection
2016 Vail Film Festival - Official Selection
2016 Nashville Film Festival - Official Selection
2016 San Francisco International Film Festival - Official Selection
2016 Montclair Film Festival - Official Selection

The Rising Star of David Oyelowo

The British Nigerian actor is fast becoming hot Hollywood property, thanks to several star turns in the spotlight, including his moving portrayal as Martin Luther King Jr. in Ava DuVernay's 2014 biopic *Selma*. In a recent interview with *Variety* magazine, Oyelowo comments on his recent work with female directors (in addition to Curran and DuVernay, he has also worked with Amma Asante on *A United Kingdom*, Mira Nair's upcoming Disney film *the Queen of Katwe* (pictured), and in *Nina* by Cynthia Mort). "The kinds of stories I want to be a part of telling are about delving into what it is to be a human being," says Oyelowo. "This is a generalization, but often, male directors are more interested in action-oriented films or franchise movies." The actor is currently filming for a screen adaptation of *Americanah*, the much loved 2013 novel by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, alongside Academy Award winner Lupita Nyong'o. Watch this space.





Academy Award nominee Rosie Perez plays Ann, Lucinda's in-home care nurse. Below: David Oyelowo, Maris Curran, and Dianne Wiest on-set.



"Grief can be so isolating...I wanted two people to open that door to look at each other."

Sherwin as an African American until he discovers parts of it himself.

Jogging seems boring until you watch *Five Nights in Maine*.

The scene in the woods. It was important to me that the film not only be set in Maine but [capture its strangeness]. In the scene in the woods you get to see what it's like for someone unfamiliar with the area. Sherman experiences it based on his life. That scene would be very different if I were in the woods.

If Pemaquid is part of your psychic geography, what did you do out there growing up?

I'd spend two weeks of the year in Pemaquid during the summers. Even as a five-year-old, I was struck by the environment. I loved climbing on the rocks with the surf by the lighthouse. Going out as far as you can walk.

Something about the danger drew you close?

As a city kid coming to rural Maine, the freedom to be on your own was what was exciting.

There were moments when I loved the 'otherness' in this film the way I loved the children traveling on the river in *Night of the Hunter*.

Yes. I love that film.

Which makes me ask, to what extent is this a continental film shot in Maine?

Maris Curran, Director

"*Five Nights in Maine* is Curran's first feature film. Previously, she exhibited her short films at film festivals and galleries across the world. Curran's recent short, MARGARITA, premiered internationally at the Huesca International Film Festival in Spain, in the US at the HBO NY Latino Film Festival, and in San Francisco at Cinema by the Bay. Maris uses film to delve into the drama of the everyday and to tell stories that take on challenging issues such as race, disability, illness and sexuality. She received a BA from Smith College and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she received a Princess Grace Award for her thesis film. Maris also participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program and was a Fulbright Fellow. She is currently developing her second feature, SELENE."

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I think it definitely has a European sensibility. What does that mean? The pacing is different. Because Europe has funds for films that seem not to be as commercially viable as something you'd associate with Hollywood, there's a wider breath of emotional themes you can work with.

How do you direct Diane Wiest? She's a most convincing Mainer.

It was an incredible joy. She's one of the best actors working. You get to know her and spend as much time with her as you can to understand her process. You ask yourself, *What does she need from me to access this character?* You're doing really vulnerable work, and that's a strength with her. I spent quite a bit of time with the actors before we shot.

After shooting, where'd you all go to have fun?

Spinney's quite a lot. We mostly ate in and around set. We stayed in a series of cabins in Phippsburg. I think many of our Maine memories surround the house.

That unnerving white frame house where Lucinda lives seems to stare at you. It's perfect. Inside it, Lucinda and Sherwin grapple with, and negotiate, their differences, their separate loneliness, their respective rights to grief.

At some moments, it nearly reaches a kind of...intimacy. Not all the way to a taboo, but outside the usual. I think that reflects my understanding of the human condition. There is intimacy in that relationship between Sherwin and his mother-in-law. A grieving woman over 65 has a present sexuality, and she does. It's not the kind of thing we're used to talking about. She hasn't had a man in the house in a long time. Feeling a man's tingly presence is part of the truth of the experience. It's not racy subject matter. It's real.

I was watching *Hush, Hush, Sweet Charlotte* over the



FILMRISE

weekend. Agnes Moorehead looks after Bette Davis as a buffer between Bette and the rest of the world. And I thought, 'Rosie Perez!' What a great job she does in *Five Nights In Maine!*

I think she is the heart of the film. She has to walk on eggshells around these two grieving people who are in incredible pain. As Lucinda's nurse—beyond the patient she's caring for—she wants to see this grieving man who comes in is also at ease. Rosie is a very serious actor. Incredibly intelligent. To prepare for her role, we talked about the ways she can be a part of the family.

The film is more artistic because it doesn't have an easy ending. Were there alternate endings?

This is how I wanted the film to end. It's not a film that's coming to answers. It's a film about exploring. I want to go on this emotional journey with this one man. We know he's going to be okay.

If you were to yelp Maine as a place to shoot films but wanted us to learn something for the future, what comment would you give?

Well, we had a tremendous experience



shooting in Maine. As we were preparing, many people suggested we shoot the film in upstate New York. Even though the incentive was lower in Maine, nobody regretted doing it. We worked with a great local crew. We didn't even have cell phone service for

a lot of the shoot, so everything got even closer. It was intimate.

Five Nights in Maine is available for rent in HD on Amazon Video for \$4.99, or for purchase for \$6.99. The DVD will be released on Nov. 9 on Amazon.com for \$24.95.

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INTERVIEW WITH Jared Martin

— Director of —

THE CONGRESSMAN

The 2016 *Washington Post* story grabbed readers with, "This ex-congressman wrote a movie about a disillusioned congressman." You know Monhegan Island because you've spent a lifetime of summers on it. It made sense that you'd direct the movie where the main character finds love, and recovers his sense of self, on Monhegan Island. But former rep. U.S. rep Bob Mrazek (D-NY) is a longtime summer resident on Monhegan, too, and he wrote the screenplay. How did *The Congressman* come about? Bob is producer, co-director, fund raiser, post-production supervisor and chief cook and bottle washer. The production company that made the film was created by him, just as the actual story has parallels in his life. As a former five-term representative from Long Island, he knew the practical and emotional core of the main

character, Charlie Winship. The moods and pulls, the waiting in airports, the strain on normal relationships, the devastating effect on more intimate relationships. He experienced the emotional triage that comes with ignoring something important in order to pursue something essential. *The Congressman* was basically his story and could not have been written by anyone else.

The Monhegan visuals are dazzling. Nature provides the special effects.
I've photographed Monhegan for over 30 years, and some shots I just knew would work for the film (the Wreck, Burnt Head,

Synopsis:

Newly divorced, attacked by corrupt lobbyists and betrayed by a member of his staff, a Maine Congressman (Treat Williams) finds his life spiraling out of control until he is able to regain his sense of purpose through the example of rugged and self-reliant constituents fighting to save their way of life on a remote island.

Starring:

Treat Williams, Elizabeth Marvel, Ryan Merriman
Maine locations: Monhegan Island, Rockland, Rockport, and Augusta.

Little White Head, a special place in Cathedral Wood). Familiarity was a big part of the advantage Bob Mrazek and I had in location scouting. We knew where the good places were because we'd been walking them for years. Our cinematographer Joe Arcidiacano quickly grasped the potential of the island.

What was it like directing Treat Williams? It's a strong outing. Did he like Maine?

Treat is a pro. He's able to add ideas on the fly and improvise lines and situations. He has layers he hasn't used yet, and he found some of them playing Charlie in *The Congressman*. While he was on the island, he



stayed by himself in a cottage on the way to the Motel house. He's a pilot and had his plane stashed in the Rockland airport, and he'd take it up occasionally. He hiked around the island in his spare time. He was completely invested in the production. I think he gave one of his best performances in a long career. I think he does, too.

There are two couples in the show. Can you tell us about how that dynamic drives the plot?

If Charlie hadn't accepted Rae's dinner invitation, he'd have been off the island when the boat exploded. He'd have heard about it, but probably, in the press of other business, not dealt with it personally. He's a congressman, not a sheriff. The character of Jared is unwrapped by meeting Ben. Finding a kindred soul helps him succumb to the siren call of the island and step outside his rigid me-first personality. He grows through meeting Ben. Charlie finds a life in meeting Rae.

It must have been a pleasure contrasting Washington D.C. and Monhegan Island, with great compression in D.C. (indoors, with tense dialogue) and release on Monhegan...

It has to do with what you point the camera at. Washington D.C. and Monhegan Island are antithetical in so many ways; architecture, clothing, transportation, nature, social mores, climate... We concentrated on the island for the first part of the schedule, realizing that would be the important part of the story: The people who live there grow up, take on a profession, marry people they know, and live their lives almost as if they were in a small English village. It was helpful to be able to cast locals in smaller parts and use real lobster boats and houses that were lived in, with chairs that creaked when you sat in them.

The statehouse in Augusta was designed by the same architect who created the Capitol in Washington D.C. Those scenes were shot on the last two days. We dashed through the halls avoiding tourists, and at one point almost tripped over the Governor. The last shot in the film was George Hamilton in his bathrobe, making a call to Ryan Merriman. The scene takes place at dawn but was shot at dusk; the light was leaving the sky and equipment was being packed quietly and loaded into vans. Much of the dialogue from this part of the film was dubbed in post production, as the



building was filled with echoes and ambient noise.

Was it expensive or a bargain to film on Monhegan? Please explain some of the challenges...

The forests and cliffs were free, the birds and other wildlife didn't mind being in the frame, the library and schoolhouse were available for a donation. Once we left the island and got to the mainland we paid full freight.

I loved Josh Mostel's rant.

I've known Josh for more than half my life. It would've been impossible not to cast him, as he's perfect for the part; and when you cast Josh you get the rant... [My father, the New Yorker cover artist] Charlie Martin and Zero Mostel first came together as two young painters in the early 1930s, both broke and living by their wits and talents. In the mid 1930s, Charlie became Zero's administrator for the Henry Street Settlement of the WPA (Works Projects Admin-

istration). Inasmuch as it was possible to administer Zero, he must have done a halfway decent job because the two men remained good friends to the end.

Elizabeth Marvel, a native Californian, convincingly plays a pensive Maine woman on island time. How'd you direct her into being one of us?

She needed no direction; she was already there. She had the accent down and the attitude and the spirit. Aside from a day or two of rehearsal before principal photography, we had no time for fine tuning and minute adjustments, motivations, intentions, etc. The actors became their characters and wore them through the entire shoot like they would a suit of clothes. Elizabeth never made a wrong move.

The basketball game was a surprise-brutal, violent, risky. It wins the audience over because it's a daring move. Did that evolve during shooting?

The scene was in the script from the start; placed there for precisely the reasons you stipulate: contrast, physicality, strong competitive coloration for Charlie, and a metaphor for the brutal seriousness of politics in Washington.



Journey to Monhegan

Manhattan-born Jared Martin has always been active on both sides of the camera. The son of Charles E. Martin, legendary for painting decades of *New Yorker* magazine covers, and Monhegan artist Florence Taylor, Jared has enjoyed summer idylls at the Martins' family cottage (above right) on Monhegan Island for decades. At Columbia University, his roommate was **Brian De Palma**. Jared apprenticed at Joe Papp's Shakespeare in the Park. His break came in the 1970s in the cult classic *Westworld*. "He is best known for his role as Steven "Dusty" Farlow, son of Clayton Farlow and boyfriend of Sue Ellen Ewing in the mega-hit *Dallas*. During and after *Dallas* he alternated between living in Rome starring in European films; and New York where he studied under Lee Strasberg [and] performed in Broadway's 'Torch Song Trilogy.' In 1988 he relocated to Toronto to star in the TV version of *War of the Worlds* as Dr. Harrison Blackwood... He [has] personally directed over 30 films, garnering awards from Cine Eagle, Intercom, and the Chicago International Film Festival." -IMDB



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Treat Williams as Charlie Winship and Elizabeth Marvel as Rae Blanchard

George Hamilton in Maine



George Hamilton is a perfect villain. How did Mr. California take to Maine?

Screenwriter Robert Mrazak, former five-term congressman from Long Island, New York, answers:

George Hamilton was a delight to work with both personally and professionally, a self-deprecating raconteur with the story telling flair of David Niven.

When he arrived in Augusta, Maine, to shoot the "Washington" scenes, I went to meet him at the motel our production coordinator had arranged for him. I was horrified when I got there. While Treat was staying at the Samoset in Rockland, George had been booked into a motel between a dilapidated strip mall and a big-box store. It smelled of disinfectant

and was in very poor condition.

I expected him to be as appalled as I was. Instead he responded to my apology by saying, "Don't worry, Bob. I've stayed in a lot worse places." George was brilliant in his scenes, particularly the seduction scene with Ryan Merriman in the Congressman's D.C. office. We ruined several takes because Jared, Treat, and I were laughing so hard.

When I expressed my appreciation that he'd come all the way from LA on a coach ticket to shoot his two day's worth of scenes, he said, "I'll tell you why I'm here. I've had many ups and downs in my career. One of the times it was in the doldrums and I didn't have anything good in the works, I answered the phone one morning and it was Fred Roos on the line. He said, "Bobby Duvall isn't going to play Al Pacino's consigliere role in *Godfather III*. I want you for the part."

Has Brian De Palma seen *The Congressman*? When you were roommates at Columbia, did the two of you have any inkling you might both direct?

We matriculated at Columbia but spent more time at Sarah Lawrence in Bronxville which had a fully outfitted film and theater department plus female actors hard to come by at Columbia. We made a series of short films. He directed, I acted. My directing came later. We worked with primitive equipment like a crank reel Bolex with a 100-foot magazine and reflector boards. From the start Brian gathered special talent around him such as Bob DeNiro, Jill Clayburgh and William Finley. . . Brian saw and liked *The Congressman*, thought it was well filmed and solidly acted. At that time we were getting a lot of over-the-top advice from folks in Hollywood who wanted to see more explosions and love scenes. Brian advised us to believe in what we'd done, cautioning us that everyone in the business wants to load you down with ideas that never seemed to work for them when they made their films. Words like this from a famous director helped steady the ship at an important time in post-production. ■

The Congressman is available for rent in HD from Amazon Video for \$4.99 or to purchase for \$14.99. The DVD is available at Bull Moose for \$9.97.