



by Suzanna Caldwell

Setbacks don't keep 'The Messenger' from resurrecting

In a true collaboration between the theater department and the film program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, "The Messenger" is finally descending.

The production is a celebration of UAF's recently Board of Regents-approved film program. Writer and director Kade Mendelowitz was looking for a way to bring the two groups into one project.

The film follows the character of Jessie, a famous talk show host in the vein of "Oprah," who is having a crisis of faith. At the same time, a man named Michael — a self-described messenger and angel from God — is performing miraculous events. Jessie's producers convince her to bring Michael on the show for a live, primetime special. The interview doesn't go as expected.

"What happens then is hopefully an interesting story on someone who renews her faith," Mendelowitz said.

Mendelowitz said the idea for "The Messenger" percolated for years. Originally, he conceived it as a play, though Mendelowitz's first love of photography and video pulled him in a film direction. When production was announced last spring, it was planned as a true theater and film collaboration. Part of the production would be filmed, while another part — namely, the interview between Jessie and Michael — would be staged live.

"I was excited about doing a film, but what I was really hoping to do was this unique, both intertwined, kind of thing," he said.

However, as with any major production, there were big challenges along the way.

The largest was the loss of the lead actor to a personal emergency just weeks before the live show was to take place. While crew was able to find a new actor (Andrew Cassel), it would have been impossible to have the cast ready for the live element.

"My wife pointed out that movies in Hollywood and productions all over the place go through major cancellations and shifts all the time," Mendelowitz said.

Another challenge included getting the university Screen Actor Guild's "signatory status" so Carrie Baker, the actress playing Jessie, could work. It required work between SAG, university lawyers and contract specialists.

"Part of the problem is we're a brand new program, so we're building the foundation as we go," said Maya Salganek, director of photography.

It was also a challenge to navigate the schedules of the many students involved. Salganek, also an assistant professor of film/video arts, taught the fall 2011 course "Let's Make A Movie." In the course, 16 students focused solely on production of "The Messenger," assisting in all elements of filming — from setting up lights to making sure scenes were set to actually filming the production.

Chris Kern, a senior film major, served as production manager. Kern said while the crew might not have been the most experienced, everyone involved was passionate about the project and dedicated to getting the film made.

"Everyone wanted to work so much that if I needed ... something, people were just jumping to go get it," he said. "They wanted to learn so bad, it made the core part of the crew, that volunteered to

work the whole film, it made our jobs a lot easier."

Mendelowitz plans to enter the film in a variety of film festivals around the country. The goal is not distribution, which is often the point of entering films in festivals. Mendelowitz wants to use the film as a recruiting tool.

"Our goal is to let people know we exist," he said. "To let the world know that we have this program."



Photo by Kade Mendelowitz Carrie Baker as Jessie, left, and Stephan Golux as Father Andrew in the scene "Seeking Guidance" from "The Messenger."



Photo courtesy of Kade Mendelowitz Director of photography Maya Salganek and writer/director Kade Mendelowitz collaborate during a shoot for "The Messenger."



Photo by Kade Mendelowitz Students in UAF's "Let's Make a Movie" class film scenes for "The Messenger."