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Werewolf

Ashley McKenzie

Producer Nelson MacDonald, Ashley McKenzie. **Production company** Grassfire Films (New Waterford, Canada). **Written and directed by** Ashley McKenzie. **Director of photography** Scott Moore. **Editor** Ashley McKenzie. **Music** Youth Haunts. **Sound design** Andreas Mendritzki. **Sound** Graham Colwell. **Production design** Michael Pierson.

With Bhreagh MacNeil (Nessa), Andrew Gillis (Blaise), Mark Woodland (Mark), Donald Campbell (Young Boy), Barry Wall (Mechanic), Katie Appleton (Ice Cream Shop Employee #1), Jessie MacLean (Ice Cream Shop Employee #2).

Colour. 78 min. English.

Premiere September 9, 2016, Toronto International Film Festival

Nessa and Blaise get petrol for their piece-of-junk lawn mower by stealing it from parked cars. Their makeshift lawn mowing business is hardly booming, but it's the couple's only source of income. They are in withdrawal, taking part in a methadone programme, and homeless. The state-sponsored therapeutic care they receive does help, but it also keeps them on a tight leash. The film neither romanticises nor exoticises the pair's arduous daily routines; its many close-ups of everything from socks being washed to medical procedures cast their path of suffering in a more sober light. But most of all *Werewolf* is a relationship drama about two individuals with very different personalities. Are they stronger together, or will Nessa eventually have to let go of the hand that's pulling her down? „It can be very threatening when someone changes,“ her social worker says, trying to encourage her not to make the same bad decision again. The film tells the story of this conflict like a sad love song, with brown methadone bottles, Nessa's hairnet, and the ever more perfect swoop of soft-serve ice cream in the cone as the refrain.

Anna Hoffmann

Live and die on Cape Breton Island

Five years ago in my hometown on Cape Breton Island, I noticed a young couple hustling down the street pushing a lawn mower. They went into my neighbour's yard and knocked loudly on the door: the guy at the front door and the girl at the side door. They were on a mission to mow lawns. Nobody answered, so the guy walked inside and I could hear an altercation happening.

I mentioned the incident to a few people in town and got the same response: 'They're the lawnmower crackheads.' I was told stories about 'crackheads' living in the woods who stole a young girl's tent out of her backyard, and the father going to the woods with a gun to get it back. The gossip was rampant, but I wanted to know about what day-to-day life was like for this couple. How did they get by? There is a struggle in my community with opiate addiction that exists mostly behind closed doors. But this one summer, it was suddenly on your doorstep. You had to look this reality in the eye. The island I live on has the highest unemployment and youth out-migration in Canada. The closer I looked into addiction and recovery, the more pervasive I realised it was.

The idea for *Werewolf* germinated here. Over the years I drew inspiration from friends who struggled with addiction and feeling trapped here, as well as reaching my own personal nadir in this place. It became a portrait of isolation and the transformations a pair of lovers undergo while attempting recovery together. Filled with heartbreak and reluctant hope. A tribute to the young people who live here and die here – and never get off the island.

Casting and live environments

With the exception of Andrew Gillis (Blaise) who played the lead in my short film *4 Quarters*, none of the performers in *Werewolf* had ever been in a film before. Most people had never acted before. I cast entirely from the local community and a lot of talent was discovered on the fly in the middle of shooting.

Andrew is a friend I grew up with and a musician in the band Rebecca's Room. I had him in mind for the role of Blaise. We met for coffee every few months over the two years I was writing and developing the film. Bhreagh MacNeil (Nessa) was cast two weeks before shooting. She's a theatre actress a friend recommended. I found her on Twitter and checked out her profile picture. She had huge eyes, teenage skin, and lots of composure. I PM'd her about auditioning for the role and a few weeks later she had the part.

Blaise's friend Mark and the young women working at the ice cream shop were people I met in the locations where we were shooting. I asked them if they would be in a small scene, and they were so natural in front of the camera that I rewrote and reshot scenes to feature them more. Integrating them into the film kept things feeling real and unpredictable for Bhreagh and Andrew. I also often put the lead actors in live environments during shooting. The ice cream shop, for instance, was open while we were shooting there, so we filmed Nessa being trained by the girls in the middle of their serving real customers. We had a small crew and camera (Panasonic GH4) and moved with the agility of a documentary team when needed.

Eventually the line between when we were rolling and when we weren't, between script and everyday life, started to break down. I would hold off on calling 'cut' to see where a scene would go when the camera would typically be shut off (one time for forty-five minutes). New material would emerge in these moments after

a scripted scene and that's often what made the final cut. We were hungry for fresh material and looking beyond the boundaries of the viewfinder to what our environment had to offer.

This blending of documentary and fiction played to our strengths. We made *Werewolf* on a microbudget and with a largely nonprofessional cast, so locking down locations and running scenes from many angles in perfect continuity wasn't going to be our strong suit. Our cinematographer, Scott Moore, didn't have a focus puller, camera assistant, grip, or gaffer. He did everything himself. We ran two cameras on most scenes with him as the sole operator. We made up rules that worked for us and we played by them.

Finding the frame

The framing choices were even scaled down to a size that fit both our resources and aesthetic needs. Mastering the mise-en-scene in a wide shot is not always achievable on a small budget, so I focused on small details that I felt encapsulated the larger emotional movements of the film. A hairnet, cookie grinder, ice cream cone, methadone dose, lockbox key, rope, lawn mower.

I like when the graphical elements of the frame can do the storytelling. It's an intuitive process. Scott and I didn't shortlist or storyboard. John Ford apparently said, 'There are 100 places you can put the camera, but only one right place.' We subscribed to that thinking and took our time during each scene to find a singular place to put the camera that felt right on a gut level, regardless of how unconventional the framing or coverage.

The world Nessa and Blaise exist in has been reduced to a suffocatingly small space. It's an uncomfortable place to be. Methadone is often referred to as 'liquid handcuffs'. It felt right to keep the camera on these characters, to stay tight, and to feel the constraints of the frame. They're on a short leash. I don't think they can see outside the tunnel of their everyday existence, so why should the viewer get the reprieve of a wide shot or cutaway?

Ashley McKenzie

Crack, mower, and the Stations of the Cross

The hardscrabble existence of two homeless addicts is portrayed with sensitivity and brutal honesty in acclaimed filmmaker Ashley McKenzie's debut feature. Shot almost entirely in oblique close-ups to capture the disorientation and frustration of McKenzie's characters, twentysomething junkies Blaise and Vanessa, *Werewolf* doggedly and courageously refuses to romanticize its characters' lives. The style suggests an affinity for Toronto minimalists such as Kazik Radwanski [director of *How Heavy this Hammer*, Berlinale Forum 2016, -Ed.], and Lodge Kerrigan's *Clean, Shaven* [1993, -Ed.]. Sleeping in tents, fighting with government bureaucrats, Blaise and Vanessa survive primarily through an underground economy. They harass people to let them cut their grass with a rusty old mower they haul over dirt roads and through rainstorms. Such scenes capture the futility, toil, and frustration in their lives with startling power, like some crack-addled version of the Stations of the Cross. It's a testament to the skill of both McKenzie and the performers that they inspire empathy in us even as we find the characters' actions perplexing and troubling. *Werewolf* confirms, boldly, the promise of McKenzie's much-lauded earlier short films.

Steve Gravestock, www.tiff.net

A minimum of junkie poetry

Smart visual choices abound: close-cropped Blaise (Andrew Gillis) is introduced as a man literally at the end of his rope; his girlfriend Nessa (Bhreagh MacNeil) crumbles Oreos in an ice-cream shop contraption suggesting a Sisyphean cycle; a burdensome bit of equipment lugged to and fro makes the production's debt to *Rosetta* (1999) and *L'enfant* (2005) clear. What McKenzie is really borrowing from the Dardennes, though, is not the spare, festival-ready aesthetic – which is actually closer to Lucrecia Martel's stylized sound design and bisected bodies – but a genuinely materialist sensibility, minus any traces of the brothers' redemptive spirituality. There's a bare minimum of junkie poetry here: addiction is not a tragic state of grace but just one more self-destructive compulsion among many, while the finely graduated interactions between the protagonists and different representatives of various institutional establishments place empathy and ambivalence side by side, where they belong.

Adam Nayman, in: Cinema Scope Online



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Ashley McKenzie was born in 1984 in Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada. From 2003 until 2007, she studied English and Film Studies at Saint Mary's University in Halifax. From 2009 to 2010, she studied directing at the Atlantic Filmmakers Cooperative in Halifax. The following year, she completed the Drama Prize Program of the National Screen Institute in Winnipeg. In 2012, she took part in the Talent Lab of the Toronto International Film Festival. *Werewolf* is her first feature-length film.

Films

2010: *Rhonda's Party* (8 min.). 2012: *When You Sleep* (12 min.).
2013: *Stray* (14 min.). 2015: *4 Quarters* (13 min.). 2016: *Werewolf*.