

Comedy producer finds emotional film rewarding

What happens when the executive producer of the biggest box-office Canadian comedy of all-time, *Meatballs*, meets up with the director of one of the most innovative and popular National Film Board comedies ever, *90 Days*?

Well, not what you'd expect.

Princes in Exile, a CBC TV movie to air this fall, is an intimate, emotional family drama about teenagers at a summer camp for kids with cancer.

Based on a book by Mark Schreiber, with a sensitive screenplay by Joe Wiesenfeld (*Anne of Green Gables*), it tells a poignant tale of a shy, bitter 17-year-old cancer victim (Zachary Ansley) who finds friendship and reason to hope.

There is humor in the film, which had its world premiere at the Algonquin Summer Film and Television Institute last week, but nothing like the antics of the characters in director Giles Walker's most recent films for the NFB, such as *90 Days*, or *The Last Straw*, a madcap sequel about the world's most potent man.

The two were among the so-called alternative drama films created by a small group of NFB film-makers in recent years, all using real people instead of actors and ad-libbed dialogue instead of scripts.

Princes in Exile was not what Walker had in mind when, after the release of *The Last Straw* in 1987, he talked of getting out of alternative drama and back to more conventional film-making. Rather, Walker said in an interview this week, his interest continues to be in "quirky, sneaky comedy."

In fact, when John Dunning, chairman of Montreal's Cinepix Inc. (which had distributed *The Last Straw* and produced *Meatballs* and its sequels) came to him with Schreiber's novel, Walker wanted no part of it.

"When he gave me the book, he might as well have put a bomb in my hands. My first wife dies of leukemia many



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years ago. I didn't get past the cover for three weeks."

Even when he had screwed up the courage to read the book, and discovered a wonderful story that he felt should be filmed, there was a part of him that didn't want to get involved, Walker said.

"I did everything I could to get the project going, but a part of me prayed it wouldn't happen," Walker said. Working on the film was still a disturbing prospect.

"It preyed on me — for a parent to have a child die, I cannot think of a greater pain."

When things started to fall in place with the film (CBC, the NFB, and Telefilm formed a rare alliance, along with Cinepix, to get it off the ground) Walker took a deep breath and went to visit Paul Newman's Hole-In-the-Wall in Connecticut, a camp for terminally ill children. He stayed with the older teens there, met their counsellors, and saw how they dealt with their illness.

"When I walked out of there two days later, it was like I was wearing a suit of armor which I haven't taken off since."

The actual making of the film was far easier — and more rewarding — than Walker expected.

"If you know someone who's terminally ill, and you're approaching the moment when you have to go visit them in hospital, you dread it. But once you're there it totally changes your life somehow. That's what making the film was like."

Walker said he thought of using real cancer victims in the film, at least in background roles, but decided the long shooting days might be physically exhausting.

The film will likely air in October or November, said Walker.



Walker
Poignant tale