



ST. JOHN'S INTERNATIONAL
WOMEN'S
FILM FESTIVAL

MARTIN'S HAGGE

Critically acclaimed short film *Martin's Hagge*, written by NL's own Gordon Pinsent, touches on mental illness with sensitivity and humour

BY DILLON COLLINS

From undisputed Newfoundland icon Gordon Pinsent comes the story *Martin's Hagge*, one which aptly, subtly and with great humour yet great sensitivity, tackles depression and anxiety.

The story was based off of Pinsent's real battle with mental illness and has been adapted into an acclaimed short film directed by Penny Eizenga and starring Sheila McCarthy, Paul Braunstein and Martha MacIsaac.

Before the film screened at the St. John's International Women's Film Festival, Eizenga and McCarthy caught up with *The Herald* for an in-depth look into *Martin's Hagge*.

Q First of all, how was the experience working so closely alongside Gordon on this project, especially on a story so personally close to him?

Penny: Gordon allowed me to read some of his material and he is quite a prolific writer. Every morning he gets up and writes something, whether it's poetry or musings or whatever. I read one of these short stories and it had another name but in later years he called it *Martin's Hagge*. I was so enamoured with the character. First of all he's terrific at de-



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signing and creating character – I think that's his specialty. I love the fact that he created this character as a physical presence for anxiety, which I had never seen before. It was so interesting and theatrical. He was kind enough to hand it over

to me and let us pursue this as a short.

Sheila: It's unlike anything I've ever been a part of. I came from a theatre background, so to be able to create something so theatrical on film is a rare experience for an actor. To also be able to work with Gordon on the film – when you see the last five minutes of the movie he basically walks away with it. It was a short shoot but a labour of love. Speaking his words were a highlight of my career, I've got to say.

Q Perhaps obvious, but how important to you was it to handle this project with a delicate sensitivity, given that this is a story so personally close to Gordon and realistically so many others? It seems like this sort of dialogue is happening more and more in the arts.

Penny: I love stories that talk about anything that has to do with the vulnerable or being marginalized or on the fringes or subject matter that isn't normally discussed. Thank God, mental health is being discussed far more than it ever has in film and TV. I think because it's so personal to him we didn't want to change his voice in it. Obviously

it was written by a man in his 80s and it's important to honour that and not try to make it your own. We're all touched by anxiety to some degree. I really felt strongly, and so did Sheila, that we really wanted to keep his voice, and I think we achieved that.

Sheila: Along with investigating what it means to be depressed and carrying that around with you, the humour in the piece shines through and is threaded through as only Gordon can write. It's a very funny, quirky, black comedy. It makes it even more moving to watch.

Penny: It was important to keep that dry humour, tongue-and-cheek, not taking himself too seriously.

Q Sheila for you, having the ability to play a character that is the physical embodiment of anxiety and depression, that must have been a challenging yet rewarding role to play?

Sheila: There's such a freedom in our business, we call it the Elephant Man part, when you're disguised as I was. Our incredible designer designed this kind of costume for me that for her symbolized depression. Bits of my costume would fall off as he no longer needs to



“The humour in the piece shines through and is threaded through as only Gordon can write.” — Sheila McCarthy

be depressed. It was as big a part of the character as what I was playing. There's freedom in being disguised like that which allowed me to really explore and allow me to do whatever I wanted. It was incredibly liberating to look the way I looked and then explore the character.

Q As filmmakers and actors, what is it like to work on something quite as delicately themed as this? One that touches on something as important as mental illness, though doing so with levity and humour.

Sheila: When we were involved in it it was such a theatrical, creative fun time.

The end result is a take away for people saying yeah, we're not alone.

Penny: There's always a danger when you're doing a shorter film that you have to get to the point fairly quickly. You have to cut out a lot of fluff and not be trite about it. I think we walked that line fairly closely. That was a concern of mine, that we not minimize, but at the same time humour can be used to overcome a very serious topic, but at the same time add some humour and likeness to it. ♦

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