

PARK LABREA NEWS / BEVERLY PRESS Article:

New Film "Waiting for Ronald" Reveals a Different World

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Developmentally disabled actor Jody Clark plays the title role in the new film "Waiting for Ronald". Waiting can be tough enough when you're waiting for Lefty or Godot or Guffman. But waiting for Ronald can be excruciating. For Ronald is mentally challenged. And when he ventures out of the comfort and safety of an institution to catch a bus and start his new life, there's a real question whether he'll make it; especially when the other young man who's supposed to meet him at the end of the trip is himself mentally challenged.

The new short film "Waiting for Ronald" is different - so different, in fact, that this touching portrayal of a momentous "day in the life" of a developmentally disabled (DD) man includes several men in the cast who are DD in real life.

In creating "Waiting for Ronald," director Ellen Gerstein brings together her two metiers: psychology and social work; and award-winning writing, directing, and producing. Drawing on her six years of experience as a social worker in Manhattan and her graduate degree in psychology, the West Hollywood resident shows the empathy and affection she feels for this population - and gives us a peek into their world.

"I got the idea from some exercise work I did in my adult acting class," Gerstein says. "Some exercises we did in class triggered it off in my mind. And from working on the feature, these characters came out."

Her extensive artistic resume (including roles on stage, television, and film) is evident in both the performances she elicits and the fine-tuning of drama and humor she balances in the small moments that make up the film. For example, Andy (Patrick Cooper) is so shy he can't tell his friend goodbye until Ronald (Jody Clark) is out of earshot. Events that we take for granted can be almost insurmountable obstacles to the developmentally disabled. At one point Edgar (non-challenged actor Michael Luckerman) has a sudden panic attack which kicks his obsessive-compulsive complex into gear and traps him in a room. We wince as we see him physically struggle to free himself. Gerstein says the film concerns "everyday heroes dealing with life." And yet the film is imbued with an infectious sense of optimism. Ronald and Edgar continually respond to problems by giving themselves affirmations like "You can do it!" and "I'm very smart." Ronald chooses as his exemplar The Little Engine that Could. And they tell their counselor Joe (veteran actor Bruno Kirby), "You give us hope."

Finding the actors after four months of casting, and rehearsing them for three months, Gerstein encouraged them to relate to each other as the characters in the film. She even invited everyone to a birthday party for the character "Ronald."

There are real-life connections as well. Gail Williamson, the mother of Blair Williamson (who plays Scotty), heads Media Access, a talent agency for the developmentally disabled that represents her son and Clark. And Gerstein and Kirby belong to the Actors Studio. The film, with sunny and colorful backgrounds, was shot on 35mm film in Brea over a one-week period. Gerstein says for herself and her cast and crew, "it was a very special time doing this film."

As a first-time director, Gerstein is heartened at the reception her film has received. Other directors who have seen the film admire its message. Mark Rydell, director of "On Golden Pond" and "The Rose," says the film "upholds class and dignity for all of the characters." And Mimi Leder, director of "The Peacemaker" and "Pay it Forward" describes Gerstein's casting as risk-taking that worked together with her direction to create "a charming, heartfelt film with a wonderful sense of humanity and humor." Last month the film premiered at the Method Film Festival in Burbank, receiving the Audience Choice Award for Best Short Film. Its mentally challenged star, Jody Clark - who until this time had worked often as an extra but never before said a word - was among five nominees for Best Actor.

"Waiting for Ronald" has been designated an Official Selection for the Beverly Hills Film Festival (May 10 at 9:45 p.m. at the Clarity Theater, 100 N. Crescent Dr., Beverly Hills (310) 779-1206) and an Official Selection for the Wine Country Film Festival in Napa Valley in August. "Hopefully it will open doors for me as a director - and for all people who have a specific dream in their lives. Hopefully it will open doors to a lot of people," Gerstein says. "I showed the film at some of the centers and they really loved it because it showed people who have a disability going ahead and doing what they want to do."

Gerstein's future plans include developing the short into a feature-length film. But with screenings at these and other upcoming festivals, audiences don't have to wait for insights into some special lives in this gentle and poignant film.