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Marin's own 'Prankster'

By Jessica Mullins
 Sausalito Marin Scope

Watch out Hollywood, Marin County is getting on the filmmaking map. Sausalito-based Prankster Entertainment has finished its first independent film, made entirely in Marin at locations including San Rafael, Marinwood and Sausalito. Larkspur resident Tony Vidal wrote, produced and directed "The Prankster," a teen movie about high school students who use pranks to right the world's wrongs.

On Jan. 30 at Skywalker Ranch, Vidal discussed how he made the film, which will premiere at San Rafael High School on Feb. 12: "I'm in shock. It can be and usually is very challenging when it comes to making a movie. I'm really grateful, honored and surprised it came together."

Vidal finished the film's first script back in 1994. It was his vision and dream to shoot the film locally. "There is so much character coming from the locations," he said.

After Prankster Entertainment raised the private equity needed for the film's \$1.7 million budget, filming began at San Rafael High School, Vidal's alma mater and the very site he envisioned while writing the script. "It was really sweet and ironic to be back at my old campus," Vidal said.

The film was shot in 23 days last fall, while school was in session. Filming around high school students was at times a tricky feat, but it worked well for both sides. Prankster Entertainment paid the school \$300,000 for the filming. Associate Producer Valerie Castro said students were respectful of the film crew. Many students appeared in crowd shots and Principal Judy Colton was given two lines.

The Sausalito Cruising Club was transformed into three different locations for the film: "Nick's Burgers by the Bay," a jazz club and a bar. A home in Marinwood was rented to serve as the residence of the film's main character. Other locations included the Double Rainbow ice cream shop in San Rafael and Sausalito's Dunphy Park.

The concept for the movie came from Vidal's days at San Rafael High, when he was part of a secret group that played "sophisticated and clever pranks." "It was our way of having a good time. People love pranks. They're an expression of the human spirit. It's about having fun and not taking yourself too seriously," Vidal said.

Breaking stereotypes

In "The Prankster," each character begins as a stereotype - such as the queen bee cheerleader or the testosterone-driven jock. "Like so many young people, they're trying to fit in and do what they think they're supposed to do," Vidal said.

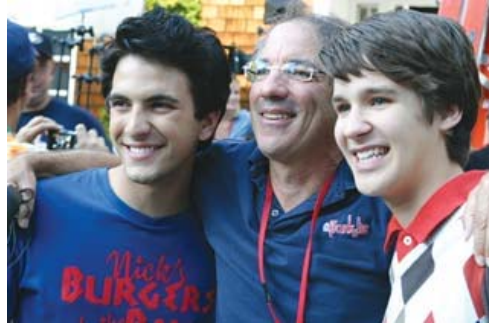
By the end of the movie, all have changed significantly. "It's about transformation. The characters discover who they are and have the courage to step out of the stereotypical roles." This includes "prince of pranksters" Chris Karas, played by Matt Angel, who becomes torn between his dreams of getting into a top college and peer pressure from his fellow pranksters.

Prankster Entertainment Associate Producer Michael Valentino said the bigger message at the end of the film "is really about following your heart and being true to yourself." The movie is meant to inspire people to enhance their lives and expand their minds and perspectives, Vidal said.

While Vidal is interested in other genres, he said he has a particular love for teen movies. "It's fantastic working with younger actors. They're so fresh, enthusiastic and unjaded."

The cast includes recognizable adult actors and younger actors familiar to the target audience, ages 10 to 18. The adults include Ken Davitian of "Borat," new "Saturday Night Live" cast member Michaela Watkins and George Corraface, whom Valentino referred to as "Greece's Robert De Niro." The younger actors include Devon Werkheiser from Nickelodeon's "Ned's Declassified School Survival Guide." Valentino said all the San Rafael students wanted Werkheiser's autograph.

The film's sound mixer was Gary Rizzo, who is nominated for an Academy Award for "The Dark Knight." Martin Rosenberg, the director of cinematography, has been in Hollywood since the early 1980s.



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Bringing moviemaking back

Making "The Prankster" has been a great success for the entertainment company, but although the film is finished shooting, the work is not over.

"Now is the hard part," Valentino said, since now they have to find a way to distribute the film, either by acquiring more money to self-distribute the film or selling it to a studio, which would decide how to release it: in theaters, on television or straight to DVD. Valentino said now that the film is "in the can," investor risk is greatly reduced.

Organizers are hoping Prankster Entertainment will take off and become the first full-time independent film company in Marin; Vidal has five more films he wants to shoot in the Bay Area.

The next movie he hopes to produce, "Heartdance," is a romantic comedy and "total chick flick," Vidal said. It's about a 36-year-old female attorney and modern dancer who is obsessed with achieving success, which to her means getting married.

Prankster Associate Producer Castro said San Francisco was a hotbed for independent films in the 1970s, but as filmmaking costs rose, the amount of locally made movies decreased. "Tony is trying to bring film back to a town that doesn't see a lot of it anymore," Castro said.

Prankster Entertainment was formed in November 2007. Vidal said he set up headquarters at 60 Libertyship Way in Sausalito because he "wanted to be in one of the most beautiful places in the world. The whole vibe is very inspiring. There are lots of artists and bohemian types. It's stimulating to be in Sausalito."

Vidal might be best known for his work co-writing "Her Best Move," an independent, family-friendly movie about a young female soccer player. "It's pretty amazing two 50-something guys can project themselves into the psyche of a 16-year-old girl, but somehow we've done it," Vidal said. The film, which was shot in San Rafael, Larkspur and Corte Madera, was distributed by MGM last summer and purchased by ABC Family/The Disney Channel. "It's fun, G-rated entertainment, unlike 'The Prankster,' which is naughtier."

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