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# Freedom State — Making history in Oregon

By Gina Binole, with E. Collins

When a creative itch surfaces, it demands to be scratched. For Aaron Kirk Douglas scratching the itch meant martialing the resources to turn a five-page script into the HD feature, *Freedom State*, debuting this March at Cinequest in San Jose, CA. In the process, he achieved a first in Oregon motion picture history.

After working more than 15 years in a variety of jobs, including as a broadcast reporter and news writer, a family law paralegal, and marketing director for a 140-attorney law firm, Douglas says, "I really needed to do something creative." So he took some classes in digital media production at the Art Institute of Portland. The short script on which *Freedom State* is based was written for one of the classes.

### IMAGINATION POWER

*Freedom State* is a comedy about sanity, a quest, and crazy love. Eight mental home patients wake up and discover that the nurse is absent and the TV is out. They also find a glass eye made in Rapture, Indiana and conclude that the apocalypse has happened. Each takes on a new role in society and finds a sense of purpose through imagination. Led by their "president" — a disenfranchised housewife named Krystal who has decided normal is crazy — they commandeer a short bus and head out on a mission to save the world's survivors.

"I don't want to tell people what they should think about the movie, but for me, and probably a lot of other middle-aged people, you can identify with her crisis," Douglas says. "It's easy to empathize with Krystal's situation. She's not happy with her husband or her life, and she doesn't know exactly what she wants. Her 'normal' life seems crazy to her, so she is trying to figure out what is really normal. A lot of us have looked at our lives and found that at some point it wasn't so fulfilling."

### COLLABORATION POWER

After a few rounds of fundraising, Douglas tapped the talents of Cullen Hoback, a Portland-based writer/director whose short, *Gaining Miles*, won the 2004 Grand Jury Prize at the New York International Film Festival. Hoback rewrote the feature script to better fit the cast and the kind of movie the pair ultimately wished to make.

Says Hoback, "I like to say in my films that imagination and free-thinking [have] a place in life. The characters in *Freedom State* have their own view of reality... and they get completely caught up in what they think is reality. Through what we perceive as fantasy, they find life... and meaning."

The film was shot in widescreen high definition over the course of eleven days using a Panasonic Varicam obtained from Portland's Koerner Camera. Many of the shoot days were vintage spring in the Northwest — soggy, gray and somewhat unsettled. The cast and crew spent six days on cinematic Sauvie Island, two days at Menucha Lodge in the Columbia Gorge, one day and night in the former — some say



Megan Murphy (Krystal)

haunted — Damdash state mental hospital in Wilsonville, OR and one day in the confessional at St James Catholic Church in Vancouver, WA.

Hoback likes to create movies that work for a wide range of audiences. "I like to structure them with layers so even an eight-year old can enjoy it," he says. "You'll see a fair amount of symmetry and purpose to nearly every set and prop, down to the numbers you see on the bus."

Both Douglas and Hoback believed it was important to allow the story to morph and change along with various influences, such as actor personalities, scene locations and gut feelings. For example, the foul weather made for some beautiful cinematography, but the unseasonably cold, wet weather also dampened spirits on occasion. The script they ended up capturing reads less like a light-hearted comedy and more like a humorous social commentary.

### AN FAO FIRST

*Freedom State* is the first fiction project sponsored by Film Action Oregon (FAO, formerly the Oregon Film and Video Foundation), owner and operator of Portland's historic Hollywood Theatre. FAO works to pre-



**Far L, Jib arm shot of cast making "asphalt angels," (Photo: James Wilder Hancock); Above Left, Nine DeJanvier as Denise**

ing on my project, and I felt completely responsible for them. Being in charge of so many people after having received a crash course in filmmaking was daunting. I had to make sure they had everything from toilet paper to tungsten fresnels," Douglas says. "In turn, they were super-professional and worked really hard. I think it shows, and I am sure everyone will appreciate the results."

And Douglas has the greatest appreciation for the cast and crew who generously donated their time and efforts to the pioneering Oregon project. More info at [www.freedomstatethemovie.com](http://www.freedomstatethemovie.com).

[freedomstatethemovie.com](http://freedomstatethemovie.com).

*Freedom State*: Pr: Aaron Kirk Douglas; Dir/Scr/Ed: Cullen Hoback; DP: Shawn Sundby; PrDsgn: Travis Nicholas Zariwny; Cstm: Martha Hines; MkUp/Hair: Alison Binford; PostSupv: Tim Scotten; SndDsgn: John Northcraft; Mus: Gregory Ives.

Gina Binole of GMB Communications is an Oregon-based writer whose articles have appeared in a variety of print and online publications.

serve the theatre and to provide a center for film, video, and multimedia education and training. In the past, only documentary projects have been produced under FAO's auspices. FAO hopes *Freedom State* will be a successful model for future Oregon filmmakers.

With FAO's fiscal sponsorship, more than \$75,000 in tax-deductible contributions was raised. Utilizing a large network of contacts and connections, Douglas coordinated a series of six fundraisers at various locations around town. Events were held at law firms where he had worked, local "exclusive" membership clubs, and the Hollywood Theatre itself. One of the movie's actors — a stand up comedian — talked several of his friends into volunteering their time for a stand-up comedy fundraiser where a small portion of the work-in-progress was screened. In exchange, Douglas provided the comics with a videotaped copy of their act, which they value as a feedback tool.

#### PRODUCING AND PARENTING

Douglas says fundraising was definitely one of the more difficult parts of moviemaking, and that wasn't necessarily a topic covered in-depth in class. A novice to narrative projects when he began *Freedom State*, Douglas says he feels like a veteran now. And he definitely understands the importance of craft services.

"I learned how to be a producer, production coordinator, and locations scout. Our first couple days were rough because I hadn't planned well enough for snacks and how hungry everyone would be. By the third day, I had a person who was there all day during the shoots," he says. "She owns this little school bus and packs it full of energy drinks, nuts, seeds, chocolate, coffee and other things. I'll never do another movie without the snack bus!"

During production, he recalls feeling like a proud parent.

"I had this weird paternalistic feeling because here were all of these people work-

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