

## Friends keep it real

The Last New Year premieres Saturday with tightly knit cast in edgy drama

BY MICHAEL D. REID, TIMES COLONIST    JANUARY 29, 2009



Director, Garfield Lindsay Miller, on the set of The Last New Year. Photo courtesy

**Photograph by:** Courtesy Garfield Lindsay Miller, Canwest News Service

John Cassavetes died 20 years ago, but the American independent film pioneer's influence is unmistakable in *The Last New Year*, Garfield Lindsay Miller's absorbing ensemble drama that makes its world premiere at the Victoria Film Festival Saturday night.

Although it takes a while to become comfortably acquainted with the characters, Miller's intimate, gradually seductive meditation on friendship and relationships grows on you. The film he co-wrote with Victoria actress and writer Casey Austin succeeds despite some hiccups on the strength of its naturalistic dialogue and tone, a top-shelf cast and the cumulative power of the dramatic interactions of a tightly knit group of 20-somethings one intense, revelatory New Year's Eve.

*The Last New Year*, screening Saturday, 7 p.m., at the Odeon, oozes hyper-realism (it was shot on DigiBeta). It recalls such character-driven ensemble pieces as *The Anniversary Party*, with at least one nod -- intentional or otherwise -- to William Friedkin's *Boys in the Band*, as it captures the camaraderie

and conflict of several self-absorbed old friends.

The Fools and Bastards Club, as they call themselves, made a pact in high school. They would reunite each New Year's Eve at a friend's loft to drink schnapps, wear wacky costumes and play games, but the mysterious disappearance of their friend Rick has unnerved them and cast a shadow on their ritual.

At the apex of this talky film's web of secrets, lies, loss and betrayal floats Penelope (Austin), Rick's seemingly fragile ex-girlfriend. To the dismay of the evening's smitten host William (Philip Graeme), she's now engaged to an outsider, Eric (Kris Holden-Reid).

Others in Penny's orbit include dashing David (James Murray), whose booze-fuelled bluntness doesn't help; struggling artist Adam (Andrew Hachey); maternal schoolteacher Katherine (Kate Hewlett); her devoted husband Ken (Mike McPhaden); free-spirited Courtney (Mayko Nguyen); promiscuous Leah (Margaret Evans), trying to turn over a new leaf; and nerdy outsider Sebastian (Aaron Webber), a candid teenaged anarchist.

As the dynamics of these friends who are trying to cope with growing up and growing apart are played out, emotional truths are laid bare. Solving Rick's disappearance, however, is not the film's focus.

Miller said the Cassavetes connection was no coincidence when told his film brought back memories of the indie guru.

"Absolutely, he was a huge influence for us," said Miller, also inspired by *The Big Chill* and *The Celebration*.

Miller drew upon his own experiences -- a crazy, "not dissimilar" Christmas party he and his friends have each year.

"We all grow and change," he noted. "People get married and have children, but in many ways we stay the same."

A passionate social activist, Miller was a familiar face on Victoria's film scene before he moved to Toronto two years ago to work with Velcrow Ripper on his documentary *Fierce Light*. A past-president of CineVic and founder of Open Cinema, he also worked with May Street Productions and co-wrote Hilary Pryor's award-winning documentary *The Fires That Burn*.

It was during an actor's strike in Ontario two years ago that Miller called Austin, 29, to ask if she'd be interested in collaborating on a script that used an "empty chair" -- an idea suggested by Graeme -- as its jumping off point.

"We wanted to do something containable about relationships between real people," Miller said. "An urban cabin movie."

Austin said playing Penny, the complex character she created, was a challenge.

"I had so much back story and knew everyone else's back story," she said. "So knowing their motivations made me feel sympathetic. It was hard to forget that."

Setting *The Last New Year* apart was that it was "family-style" moviemaking. Many in its collaborative cast were friends and theatre-trained. She also got to work with her husband Nick Blasko of Atomique Productions.

As the film's music supervisor, he brought in homegrown acts such as *Jets Overhead* and *Jon and Roy* to complement the music of established bands such as Tegan and Sara, the Be Good Tanyas, *Wintersleep* and the *Black Angels*.

"That was the idea, to bring people together who knew each other, so the feeling of friendship would be real," Miller said.

Like it or not, the friends got a whole lot closer during the low-budget film's three-week shoot a year ago in Miller's Cabbagetown loft. He and his roommates had to move out for the occasion.

"Every inch of our space was filled with gear," he lamented.

"If we were shooting in the living room, the kitchen was turned into makeup or wardrobe space. I don't know if I want to do that again."

While *The Last New Year* seems a departure for a social activist, he said it's not entirely so.

"I think I brought Sebastian in as a way for me to express those activist feelings," he joked.

His next socially relevant film is *Blowin' in the Wind*, which he's co-writing with Pryor. It's a portrait of Percy Schmeiser, the septuagenarian Saskatchewan farmer and subculture hero who took on the Monsanto chemical company.

Meanwhile, he's just happy to be back in the city where he lived for so many years for the world premiere.

Said Miller: "I couldn't imagine a better place to have it."

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