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Entertainment & Life

Fort Smith film invites viewers to step into Miss Laura's

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"The archetype of Miss Laura's is controversial, to say the least."

That statement about the Wild West-era bordello in Fort Smith comes from filmmaker Devon Parks, a Van Buren High School graduate and former production assistant for Hollywood director-producer Ridley Scott ("The Martian," "Alien"). Parks' Emmy award-winning production company, Mad Possum Pictures, is in the process of making "Step Into: Miss Laura's," its second film in its "Step Into" movie series that explores area historical landmarks, events and people.

A follow-up to "Step Into: The King Opera House," "Step Into: Miss Laura's" will incorporate factual events about Miss Laura's while focusing on four young females inside the house. All four individuals represent the different dynamics that "could and most likely did" exist inside the house, said Parks.

"We'll be shooting on a couple of RED Digital Cinema cameras, and we've projected a finished date in March," he said. "We plan to premiere the film in Fort Smith."

Written by Mad Possum Pictures producer/writer/actor Chuck King, the 25-minute movie will be filmed inside Miss Laura's and other area locations beginning Dec. 27. Area residents wishing to audition to be extras in the film can submit a "head-shot" photo by clicking the "casting call" section of www.madpossum.com.

"We've recently closed deals for several great actors in Los Angeles, and ironically, most of the cast we are bringing from L.A. have ties to Arkansas," added Parks. "At one point in auditions, the five people in the room were all from Fort Smith."

The film's cast members include Marlane Barnes as the story's lead character, with "strong" support from actors Lauren Sweetser, Brandon Keener and Hunter Doohan, Parks said. Barnes has appeared as the mind-reading Maggie of the Irish coven in "The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part 2" and was seen in "Sons of Anarchy," "Mad Men," "Ray Donovan" and "The Fosters."

Keener, a Fort Smith native, has starred in the TV shows "Marvel: Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.," "Castle" and "Criminal Minds," as well as the films "Zookeeper," "The Guilt Trip," "Catch Me If You Can" and "Traffic."

Former Fayetteville resident Sweetser acted in "Winter's Bone," "Law and Order: LA" and "NCIS: Los Angeles."

Mad Possum Pictures officials recently raised \$10,000 via an online "crowdfunding" campaign, but they are still "\$10,000 short from making the movie," he said. Those wishing to donate can do so at the Fort Smith Museum of History, which is a nonprofit partner to Mad Possum Pictures, King said.

"We started out with a budget of approximately \$35,000, and we are still waiting to hear from the Arkansas Humanities Council," he said. "I put in for a grant from them; they have money that is directed at films on history and humanities."

Like Miss Laura's itself, the announcement of the plans to make "Step Into: Miss Laura's" attracted some caution and opposition, Parks said.

"Through the early stages of development, there were great amounts of support, but also opposition for the project and how we would portray the idea of prostitution," he said. "It's important for us to try and tell the partial stories we know that girls in the house went through, whether by choice or coercion."

For King, the "Step Into" film series is a vehicle to promote Arkansas history and tourism while offering quality entertainment.

"We started looking at places in our areas — not just the buildings themselves, which are wonderful — but at the stories that happened inside them," he said. "Miss Laura's has a history of its own. The thought was, 'Who were the people living in the building? Why were they there? What is their story?'"

Unlike "Step Into: The King Opera House," "Step Into: Miss Laura's" will be a "fully narrative drama" based on the months of research and meetings conducted by King. Pre-production work called for King to meet with individuals who had second- and third-hand accounts from inside and outside of Miss Laura's while it was still operating.

Parks praised King's efforts and artistic vision for the new film.

"Chuck has done a great job of combining the factual information with a historical interpretation of how the house operated through the lens of that culture and other similar scenarios," Parks said.

For Parks, planning for "Step Into: Miss Laura's" has given him a deeper appreciation for Arkansas.

"Living away from the area gives me a greater admiration than I had before leaving," he said. "And fortunately, the resources and historical elements already in place have allowed me to tell authentic and local stories on the last few films I've done."

"I'll shoot all I can in Arkansas," Parks added. "It's cheaper, and most people are excited and welcoming of the process."