

Jay Burke Interview – Writer/Director of Whaling City



NewBedfordGuide.com had the privilege of sitting down with writer and director Jay Burke, to ask him some questions about his upcoming movie, *Whaling City*. The movie is currently in post production, with a release date to follow later this year. Stay tuned in the coming weeks and months for NewBedfordGuide's coverage of the *Whaling City* movie. We will be featuring news on the movie, as well as interviews with the cast and crew.

When do you estimate the release of the movie will be?

We plan to have one or two local screenings in the New Bedford area in the spring of 2011. After that, there will be some film festivals, where distributors determine theatrical, DVD, and other possible forms of distribution for the film.

Describe the plot of Whaling City.

WHALING CITY is the story of Sean, a third-generation New Bedford commercial fisherman, whose world is threatened by tightening regulations, waning catches and economic downturn. Unable to pay his bills, Sean fights the bank's moves to foreclose on his boat, and the courts threaten to strip him of

the right to see his daughter. With options fading, Sean contemplates a one-off smuggling run that could put him in the clear, but could also cost him his life. At the same time, he develops a relationship with a local marine scientist.



An independent commercial fisherman must fight to save his boat, his livelihood, and his way of life.

You won the Alfred P. Sloan Screenwriting Award in 2005 for your *Whaling City* screenplay, and five years later you finally got to make it into a movie. How closely did the movie you made stick to the original screenplay?

Whaling City won a 2005 Screenwriting Award and a 2007 Feature Film Production Grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. In the past, those Sloan awards served as seed money for projects. However, we were faced with the worst economy since the Great Depression, and it was nearly impossible to raise additional investment in the project. Nevertheless, we stuck very, very close to the original screenplay, on an absolutely shoestring budget.

Were you forced to change anything in the movie due to budget constraints? In other words-was there anything you wanted to do that you ended up not being able to do?

Most of the trimming was done within scenes, as opposed to cutting characters or locations. We were pretty ambitious about what we set out to do, and really, we didn't stop short at attempting to shoot the film in the way we felt it should be shot. That resulted in a pretty relentless schedule where we were very much at the whim of many factors – weather variances, accessibility of boats and locations, cast availability, even fishing schedules. At the end of the day, we made the film for a lot less money than we initially planned. We are still putting together money in post-production in order to finish editorial and get the film out.

You followed an interesting path to become a director. Give us the Cliff Notes version of how you got there.



The man behind Whaling City: Jay Burke.

I was born in New Bedford and grew up in Dartmouth. I went to Dartmouth High, played sports there, but was also always involved in art classes and things of that nature. I started off as an architecture major at the University of Notre Dame, but ended up in Economics. That led me to an early career as a management / technology consultant with Accenture (Andersen Consulting) for six years – four of which I spent in the Sydney, Australia office. This was an amazing time in my life, where I got to go all over the world on my own and really learned a lot about life in general from my travels.

All the while, I took night classes in photography, film,

screenwriting, etc. After Accenture, I went to film school at Columbia University in NYC, a terrific film school that stressed writing and story. After Columbia, I worked at an ad agency in NYC, followed by 3+ years as a web producer at Major League Baseball, where we ran all the MLB.com websites, including redsox.com. During this time, I was revising my *Whaling City* script, and it was the 2007 grant from the Sloan Foundation that made the project a reality.

How much on-location shooting went on in New Bedford and the surrounding areas?

All of our shooting was done “on location,” meaning we really didn’t use any sets or studio space. Often times we were shooting in live, working environments, which presented its own set of challenges, mostly related to sound. We shot in New Bedford, Fairhaven, Westport, Fall River, and even out at sea on a commercial fishing boat.

Where was your favorite location in the New Bedford area that you filmed at?

It is difficult to choose a single favorite location because of the community’s overwhelming support and cooperation. I encourage people to check out the “supporters” areas of our website, whalingcityfilm.com, which we continue to populate with the people and entities who were so generous and kind. The city of New Bedford and surrounding areas are honestly “a set” in and of themselves; the area is just great. Since I received the Sloan Screenwriting Award in 2005, I hit the bricks pretty hard at film markets, primarily in New York City, where you pitch your ideas to prospective producers and financiers. At these markets, I really sold the cinematic nature of the New Bedford area pretty hard, which helped generate a ton of interest in WHALING CITY. However, when we started our real push in the fall of 2007, the bottom fell out of the economy... and that was that. Ultimately, we elected to shoot the film on a very, very low budget.

Can you tell us a little about Kickstarter, and describe your involvement with the organization?

We have an early trailer for WHALING CITY up on our Kickstarter campaign, which you can view here. We encourage everyone to have a look, and even if people cannot make a pledge, we ask them to please email your friends with the link and help spread the word!

Kickstarter is a funding platform for creative projects where people can pledge financial support to film and other artistic projects. It is not about investment or lending, but in exchange for a pledge of support, rewards and/or experiences that are unique to Whaling City are offered. We had to be accepted into Kickstarter, meaning not just any project can simply sign up and run a campaign. There is a vetting process that we went through. On Kickstarter, it is all-or-nothing funding, meaning a project must reach its funding goal before time runs out or no money changes hands.

Over the last few years, Massachusetts has made an effort to make filming in the state accessible. Did you have much interaction with the Massachusetts Film Office, and if so, what where they like to work with?

The Massachusetts Film Office provided us with a great deal of guidance and support, particularly at some critically challenging junctures. I thank Nick and Mary for their kind support of our project, and for the set visit they made during production. Their office is very under-staffed, yet they have been responsible for bringing in many studio-financed, multi-million dollar features into Massachusetts, helping stimulate the economy. At the same time, they recognize the importance of small, home-grown projects such as ours, and developing a home-grown, creative economy in places like New Bedford, where I am telling a story about the place I grew up in. The MFO deserves a lot of credit in generating business and growing an industry in Massachusetts with very few resources, in a poor

economy. Their existence is critical to the future of filmmaking in this state.

Check out our website at <http://www.whalingcityfilm.com>, or fan us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/whalingcityfilm>!