

Whaling City: An Interview with Jay Burke



by Eric
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As the city of New Bedford prepares for the fast-approaching screening of local director Jay Burke's film "Whaling City" on September 24, NewBedfordGuide.com talked with the film's writer and director, Jay Burke. Also, see our recent interview with the film's star P.J. Sosko.

New Bedford Guide (NBG): Tell me about you and your connection to the area and how you got interested in film.

Jay Burke (JB): I was born in the area, in New Bedford, and grew up in Dartmouth. I went to Dartmouth High School. I have a big family here. I went to school out in the mid-west, to Notre Dame for my undergraduate degree, and was an economics major. Then I started working in Chicago right after college. I worked out there for a couple years, then I went to Sydney, Australia where I did some consulting. I was there for almost four years. It was just a random opportunity that presented itself, you know, I was young, not tied down by anything. While I was there, I started taking night classes for screen writing. That was about 1995 or 1996. I took some still photography classes, too. It was about that point where I thought I was really interested in film-making and the process. After three and a half years, I came back to the states, working for the same company out of the Boston office. During that year, I applied to film schools. Columbia was my first choice. You do about two years of

classes, but you're attached to the university for about five years. It's not intensive; you're working on screenplays, taking night classes, and working. I was working for an ad agency doing some web stuff. It was while I was at Columbia that I conceived the idea for Whaling City and wrote the first draft while I was a student there.



NBG: So this is your first big film project, officially?

JB: Yes. I worked on a bunch of student stuff while at Columbia, and one short film in Australia. But nothing that was ever intended to be really robust or audience-ready. So this is my first feature film and my first major film.

NBG: How did Whaling City begin? Why this story? Tell me about the writing and research involved

JB: At Columbia we're required to have a thesis feature script. A lot of people naturally had ideas for their feature scripts. There's a lot of diversity at Columbia. It was really important to me not to recycle the story from somewhere else. I couldn't say there was one event that led me to the story, but it was at a time I was back visiting here, I think it was Thanksgiving. I was just kind of walking the streets downtown in New Bedford, and the fog rolled in, and it just kind of hit me like, 'Wow, this place is really cinematic. There's a ton of history here and there has to be a story here that's original that I can connect to and get excited about.' Right around that time there were some earliest publicity coming out about the struggles of commercial fishing. I think

it was about 1999. There was a four-part series about commercial fishing in New England in the Boston Globe. There started to be stories locally here by the Standard-Times. I started to read that stuff and realized that there were some real contemporary stories going on right under our noses right here in New Bedford. The impression I got at the time was that the fishermen didn't have much of a voice or unified voice. I wasn't trying to be too political with it, but I thought it was a story about something real, with real conflict. So that was the seedling of the project. Why this story? I think it's because it's intrinsically connected to the area. I never really had the desire to go out to L.A. and work on big studio films or anything like that. It's the process of the filming that's more interesting to me, not the industry itself. The experiences I've had working small and independently have been a lot more rewarding than the limited occurrences I've come in contact with concerning the larger industry.



Filming in the Mariner's Home in downtown New Bedford.

NBG: How did you get funding for the project?

JB: At that time, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, which historically has financed documentaries, like on PBS, started to put up money for small, independent narrative projects. I submitted for a production grant, which would serve as seed money for the film. In 2005, the Sloan administrators liked

it, but I didn't win the big production grant. I got a \$10,000 screen-writing award, which to me was kind of a way to say keep developing the script. It has some promise. That's when I kicked it into gear, and instead of writing across three different screen plays, I focused on the one and really tried to get it to the point where it was ready. It was late in 2007 when the feature film production grant came from Sloan. That was really the beginning of the production, the fact that the production was going to be real.

NBG: Was the funding exclusively through Sloan, or did you get money from other sources?

JB: Most of the funding came through Sloan. I used a good amount of my money that will end up going unaccounted for, for various things. I couldn't even begin to add up those numbers. At one point we had a good amount of interest and some moderate [outside] investment, and that was around September of 2008. If you look at the Dow at that time, that was basically when everything bottomed out, so the timing couldn't have been worse for us.

NBG: Were these investors private individuals or companies?



JB: They were private. We were working to pushing the project forward when everyone was pulling back. The Sloan administrators were eager to see the project start and they were patient with us. We were concerned that if we dragged the project out any longer that the Sloan people would feel we were wearing out their patience. So we just decided to pull

the trigger. We didn't trim the script too much, didn't trim the characters too much, and in retrospect, probably set out to shoot too ambitious of a film for the budget that we had. At that point the important thing was just making that decision and not turning back from it. That's been the guiding principal since then, is just to continue to press forward no matter what the obstacles, and there were a lot of obstacles.

NBG: What kind of obstacles?

JB: Well, I mean we were doing something fairly unconventional, in terms of shooting in the working environments of commercial fishing. A lot of the boats didn't know what their schedules would be, so in terms of scheduling a film, which can impact tons of things, like budget. We only had a certain amount of flexibility with weather and things like that. We had boats we were going to shoot on that were going to go out fishing that shuttered up and stopped fishing in short span of time we had to shoot. Other boats' schedules would change based on the weather and that would change our schedule. It's also a lot more difficult to schedule with such a large cast. Those were just some of the big production hurdles. A lot of this stuff is solved in larger productions with money, but money was something we didn't really have any flexibility with and that tends to exacerbate a lot of the problems. So you come up with creative ways how to solve those problems. One of those was the issue of the protagonist's boat. It was really about six boats that we shot on. We used different areas of different boats a la carte to construct one boat.



Congressman
Barney Franks
makes a cameo
appearance in
Whaling City.

NBG: You feature a lot of locally and nationally famous landmarks around the city, as well as a few local businesses. How did you get these people involved with the project?

JB: A lot of it was just one-on-one, meeting people and introducing the story to people. We let some people read the script. We had a few people who were lynch-pins in helping introduce us to various people, business owners and people like that. Phil Mello is the president of the New Bedford Port Society and he helped us with several locations in terms of getting permission to shoot at the Mariner's Home and such. There were people with the city of New Bedford, like the mayor's office, and the economic development council who helped introduce us to a lot of local businesses. And a lot of it was just crew members knocking on doors and making phone calls. There's something to be said for the community in terms of the level of support they provided because, for the most part, almost everybody was very cooperative. We explained we didn't have much of a budget, and it was rare for anyone to ask for a big chunk of change and not let us shoot there otherwise. People in tenement houses and businesses

were all superb, accommodating, and generous. We never would have had the variety of interesting locations that we were able to get without their help.

NBG: There are a lot of local people featured in the movie, did you have any local people working on the crew?

JB: Oh yeah. The guiding principal behind most of the decisions that we made was to go local whenever we could, and we did that. I think we held really true to that. There are also a handful of local actors we brought in from a local casting call back in March of 2010. We posted ads in some of the trade publications and got about five very experienced crew members from the greater New Bedford area to work on the project, as well as people from Middleboro, Rehoboth, and the Cape. If somebody was qualified and we thought we could work well with them, we wanted to keep it local. We used a casting company up in Boston to get some real New England actors, and we held some independent casting sessions down in New York. Some of the music, too, is by a local guy who plays in New Bedford all the time, but I haven't announced that yet.

NGB: From the beginning of the project up until today, can you think of any particular experience or instance that stands out to you that changed the way you thought about what you were doing?

JB: I think the real moment that was a totally new experience for me was when things start to gel and you see things connect in the wider context. I think that's one of the more rewarding things. It's never exactly how you originally envisioned it, but as far as I'm concerned, I enjoy that process of discovery.

A public screening of Whaling City will be shown at the Zeiterion Theater starting at 8 p.m., Saturday September 24th. Details can be found here and tickets can be purchased on the Zeiterion's website. Keep up-to-date on the film by

subscribing to the Whaling City Facebook page or by visiting their website.

Whaling City Trailer

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