



Drawing Home both intimate and epic in retelling the love story of Peter and Catharine Whyte

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In the winter of 2011, two very different film productions were underway in the Canadian Rockies. One was a unit shoot for Hollywood blockbuster, *The Bourne Legacy*. The other was *Drawing Home*, a low-budget biopic about Banff wildlife artists Peter and Catharine Whyte.

The team producing *Drawing Home* was hoping for snow and plenty of it since there was no budget to produce it artificially. The folks behind *Bourne Legacy*? Not so much. So when a blizzard descended on the mountains, the two teams had very different reactions.

"We realized we would never be able to afford this digitally, so we all ran out trying to capture it," says *Drawing Home* producer Margarethe Baillou, in a conference call with the Herald alongside fellow producer Allan Neuwirth. "We were running in opposite directions. It was really quite comical."

"Our first AD at the time was monitoring the weather conditions, moment by moment, on his laptop," adds Neuwirth. "We waited for just the right moment to plunge into the blizzard when we could actually shoot and capture anything other than pure white on the screen. It was hair-trigger timing."

Such is the reality of making an epic film with a less-than-epic budget. *Drawing Home*, which has American, European and Alberta producers, was filmed in Banff, Lake Louise, Priddis, Calgary, Morley, Montreal and Oka Beach in Quebec throughout 2011 and 2012. It was an ambitious schedule for an ambitious film that chronicles the romantic life of the Whytes from their early days as 1920s art students in Boston to Peter's death in the 1960s.

But the six-year span from the start of filming to its public debut Wednesday as part of the Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival had made for an unusually long gestation period, even for a biopic of this scope.

"The filming took over a year because we had to cover various different seasons and terrains and periods in the Whytes' lives," says Neuwirth. "We couldn't do it all at once. We didn't have the mega Hollywood budget to let us recreate times of the year and fake snow. We had to use the real thing for everything. With post-production, we took a great deal of care. We went through several different cuts. We were not satisfied, so we just kept on plugging away on it until we got to where we felt it was getting to where we wanted."

Drawing Home is the debut of filmmaker Markus Rupprecht, who developed a compact HD camera in his native Germany that proved particularly useful when trudging through the mountains. The film's use of Alberta's

stunning vistas, and the period recreations of iconic spots such as downtown Banff and Lake Louise in the 1920s, certainly helps with the epic feel, as does the ensemble cast.

While the film includes a number of veterans — Rutger Hauer as German painter Carl Rungius, Wallace Shawn as an art-loving tourist, Kate Mulgrew as Catharine's blue-blooded American mom — the heavy lifting is done by young actors Juan Riedinger and Julie Lynn Mortensen in the lead roles.

The fact that both actors are local — Riedinger grew up in Banff, Mortensen in Calgary — was a bonus, but really just a happy accident during the casting process. It turns out the two knew each other from the drama program at the University of Calgary, which helped with chemistry during the auditions.



This may have given them a head start, but both actors discovered there were mountains of material about the Whytes' fascinating backstory just waiting to be discovered.

"I spent days in the basement of the Whyte Museum," says Mortensen. "I have journal entries from Catharine from the time she was 10 years old all the way up until she married Peter. She stopped journaling but at that point she started writing her mother every day. I had every journal, every letter."

For Mortensen, this trove of archival material offered insight into what was almost a fairy tale, too-good-to-be-true romance. In fact, the early parts of *Drawing Home* have an earnest, family friendly feel, as the seemingly mismatched pair live out an idealized love story amid the stunning backdrop of the Canadian Rockies.

Catharine was a wealthy American blue-blood whose future seemed comfortably mapped out by the time she entered art school. Her education was meant to be a minor dalliance before returning to a lavish lifestyle in Concord, Mass., where she was poised to marry John D. Rockefeller III (played by Jeff Gladstone). Instead, she fell for the impoverished Whyte and chose to live in a rustic cabin in the mountains. As with many biopics, certain periods of the Whytes' lives are considerably abridged and dramatic licence was taken with others. But the film offers authentic studies of two defiantly unique characters and a touching love story.

Mortensen delivers a remarkable performance, playing Catharine as a beaming free-spirit. She says her character's risk-taking and refusal to accept the expectations of the day for women were inspiring. "It definitely resonated (with me) as an actor making the choice to commit to this life when there are a lot of things that would be a lot more comfortable," she says.

Things certainly get very uncomfortable for the Whytes. Their storybook romance began to unravel after a fatal accident during a blizzard sends Peter into a spiral of guilt, alcoholism and general decline.

Like Mortensen, Riedinger relied on the archival material at the museum to capture his character. Old audio recordings of Peter and black-and-white photographs were particularly revealing. Both actors also talked to people who knew the Whytes in Banff, a town where their presence still looms large even though Catharine died nearly 40 years ago.

"One of the big pressures as an actor is that you want to do this person justice," says Riedinger. "This was a living figure and there are people who are familiar with this person and you want to make sure you are playing him authentically."

As for the film's lengthy post-production process, both actors are thrilled that audiences will finally be able to see the film. Mortensen has been nominated for a UBCP/ACTRA Award for her performance. The Nov. 12 ceremony will be another chance for a reunion between the actress and Riedinger, who has been nominated for his role in the CBC thriller *The Romeo Section*. Both have seen the film, but Wednesday's screenings are the first time it will be viewed by the public.

"I just feel like it's a beautiful film and about things that are important to see," Mortensen says. "I think it will be a very cherished experience for Banff to be able to see it first."

Drawing Home will screen Wednesday at 7 and 9:30 p.m. at the Lux Cinema Banff as part of the Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival.
