

Filmmaker Finds Area a Perfect Set

Purcellville Man's 2nd Movie Premiering

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As a child, filmmaker Frank Sciorba remembers being bored whenever he wasn't inside a darkened movie theater.

"When I hit daylight, my whole life would stop until I went to a movie again," said Sciorba, 56, a Purcellville writer, producer and director. "I've been making films inside my head since I was five years old."



Equine actor Avery's Mark, owner George Wiltshire, left, and filmmaker Frank Sciorba at Mosby Spring Farm. (Tracy A. Woodward - The Washington Post)

He has been making them in real life since 2001, when he wrote a screenplay and filmed his first movie, "The Vulture's Eye," a horror film based on Bram Stoker's novel "Dracula." He made the movie on a shoestring budget, filming in Loudoun, Fauquier and Prince William counties with local actors who worked for free.

Sciurba's second movie, "Perfect Poison," a thriller-love story, was also shot in Loudoun and Fauquier last year, at such locations as the Ashby Inn in Paris, the Horse Country Saddlery in Warrenton and the historic Quaker village of Waterford. It premieres Sept. 19.

"We have everything right here in Loudoun County, so I put it together here," said Sciurba, who based his screenplay on Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Rappaccini's Daughter."

In Hawthorne's tragic tale, set in Renaissance Padua, the beautiful daughter of a scientist, who is confined to a mysterious garden, attracts the attention of a young medical student who is determined to meet her -- a decision with fatal consequences. Sciurba's version -- which, trying not to give away too much, he calls "a classic tale of best intentions that go horribly awry" -- is set in the early 1960s.

In Sciurba's version, Lorenzo Rappaccini is an Italian scientist who once worked for Mussolini. Rappaccini and his beautiful daughter, Beatrice, immigrate to the United States so he can conduct chemical and biological warfare research at Fort Detrick, Md. Their glamorous lifestyle on an estate in the Virginia horse country is shaken when a handsome drifter enters their lives.

"The film itself came a lot closer to what I believe I'm capable of doing as a filmmaker," Sciurba said.

Sciurba, a photographer moved to Warrenton in the 1980s and to Purcellville three years ago. Over the years, he has sold several pilot scripts to television networks, but none was ever produced. By 2001, he felt if he didn't take the leap into filmmaking, he never would.

"I'm not very good at verbalizing," Sciurba said. "Film is the one art form I really relate to."

The idea of making a movie based on the Hawthorne story was suggested by Sciorba's girlfriend, M.J. McAteer, letters editor at The Washington Post, a former English major and a Hawthorne fan.

As to cost, Sciorba would only say that the production depended mostly on donated props and settings. Like the actors in "The Vulture's Eye," which was bought by a distributor last year and is available on the Internet, the actors in "Perfect Poison" received no compensation other than a promise of a percentage of any future profits.

One donated setting was a stable with old-fashioned wooden stall doors. For three weeks in October, an old oak tree on George Wiltshire's Mosby Springs Farm in Middleburg became the backdrop to a crucial scene in "Perfect Poison." His horses were incorporated into the plot, and even his daughter Annia Dowell-Wiltshire, now 16, ended up an extra.

Wiltshire, 62, said that the experience motivated him to perform some upkeep long delayed since his wife died eight years ago.