

sinkhole

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SINKHOLE SYNOPSIS

“That’s a terrible thing you did – taking advantage of a young girl like that.”

Jason Griffin, ex-high school teacher, hears that a lot around his small town. Accused of having romantic relations with one of his students, Jason was fired, and carries the shame of something he insists never happened around with him every day. His life and his family are in ruins – his ex-wife Pris now lives with her parents, along with his three-year old daughter, Mirry – and the only true friend he has is a shut-in, porn-addicted pothead named Poppy. Now Jason grinds out a meager living bulldozing at the local landfill, but things are about to get a lot more interesting.

When he discovers a young woman’s body lying among the tangled brush in the landfill, Jason is thrown into a corrupt rural underworld he never knew existed. Strange people – like the violent, enigmatic Bob White, and good old boy ring-leader Commissioner Whitley – begin offering him work in return for his loyalty. Jason isn’t too sure he should cooperate, but his mounting debts and his ex-wife’s frustration at his lack of direction push him into playing along.

When Jason reluctantly accepts Bob White’s offer, he meets Alfonse, an affable sociopath who initiates Jason into the almost casual depravity of a rural crime underworld. Though the money’s good, Jason knows things are teetering dangerously between bad and worse. The threat of violence constantly lingers, and the sinister charms of this dark culture are tough to resist. Making things worse, Jason’s own unresolved impulses toward his teenaged accuser – whether toward retribution or reconciliation – are growing ever more complicated.

SINKHOLE

Filmed over 21 days in rural Western North Carolina, *Sinkhole* is the 2nd feature from writer/director Paul Schattel, after the digital 78. Shot by an Asheville, NC-based cast and crew, *Sinkhole* tells the story of a disgraced, ex-high school teacher who becomes embroiled in a small town methamphetamine ring.

THE STORY

"I grew up in rural Alabama," says Schattel, "and I spent a lot of time in a little town in the northwestern part of the state called Jasper. Jasper's an odd place – it's not far from where Elvis Presley grew up, and it's located on the same road that took James Earl Ray to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. It's a mining town, and the landscape is riddled with strip mines and other post-industrial places, so you have this half-ruined, half-Forest of Arden quality. But now the mining companies have pulled out and there's not enough work for everyone, so there's a meanness there, a darkness on the backroads and in the air. It's truly the dark heart of the South. I knew the landscape there was ripe for many types of stories, and *Sinkhole* is one of them."

Schattel wanted to set a story in a town like Jasper, and began researching the newspapers of small mining towns all over the South to learn which stories seemed to be the most interesting. "The methamphetamine thing kept coming up again and again – stories of hotel room deals, trailer park labs, small town corruption, that sort of thing. It's very easy to caricature that world, though, so I knew I wanted to show a different side, a side that didn't play up the 'redneck' or 'country music' cliches. Also, I'd heard of a man whose teaching career was shut down by the accusations of a young student. It turned into a he said/she said type of thing, and before he knew it the guy was no longer a high school history

teacher, but was literally working at the chicken processing plant down the road. It was the dovetailing of those two ideas that led to *Sinkhole*."

CHARACTERIZATION

"From the beginning, Jason was conceived of as a flawed man," Schattel explains. "I've never been a fan of the square-jawed hero who makes all the right decisions. Jason's a real guy – like me, and most people I know, he's screwed up, trying to do what's best, but wrestling with some self-destructive inner demons. I wanted to play with the idea that our hero may not be such a hero all the time – that he is his own worst enemy."

One of everyone's favorite filmmakers, Stanley Kubrick, once lamented during the dark days when *Full Metal Jacket* was unfavorably compared to *An Officer and a Gentleman*, that most audiences seem to need to be emotionally endeared to their lead characters. "He complained that – instead of a protagonist like *FMJ*'s Private Joker, who we may not 'feel' much for in the conventional way – most audiences would rather root for a more traditional hero who we hope overcomes all obstacles, " said Schattel. "Like Kubrick, we wanted to approach storytelling from a more objective, maybe more realistic, perspective – to let us observe, and experience more multifaceted emotions than just rooting for good guy, the David in the David and Goliath story. We empathize with Jason, while maybe approving of all of his decisions – he's a classic anti-hero. And you can see this idea working in a character like Alfonse, as well – we like Alfonse, he's not a bad guy to have on your side, but he's got issues. This convolution is at the heart of the questions *Sinkhole* is asking."

CASTING

"We knew whoever played Jason would basically be asked to carry the film," Schattel explains. "So we needed someone who was incredibly likeable and sympathetic, even while doing these often questionable things." So Schattel turned to truck driving, honky tonk-singing Asheville native Bryan Marshall. "In many ways, Bryan is that guy," Schattel says. "Bryan's very soft spoken, but he's also incredibly articulate, and he understands that blue collar cultural landscape better than anyone I know."

The leader of the Gone Wrongs, a classic country combo and one of Asheville's most popular bands, Marshall knows how to get inside that working class world without caricaturing it. "Bryan's been a long-haul trucker and construction worker, among other things. His hands are seriously calloused. And it helps that he knows how to work that heavy equipment. On one of the days at the landfill, in fact, we couldn't get the police car down to where we wanted it to be for the scene, so Bryan casually hopped into one of the tractors and literally made us a road to drive down. Let's see Robert DeNiro do that."

For the role of Alfonse, Schattel turned to stage and screen veteran Robin Spriggs. "Robin really understood the whole 'now he's funny, now he's creepy' vibe for Alfonse," Schattel explains. "Alfonse is mercurial, in the way that he functions both as Jason's big brother and as his prison guard, so to speak. So we needed an actor who could be hugely charismatic and threatening at the same time."

To bring Jason's friend Poppy to life, Schattel went with J.R. Hooper, an Asheville native who has a reputation as one of North Carolina's finest character actors. "Like most of the roles in *Sinkhole*, Poppy walks a fine line between being sympathetic and intolerable," says Schattel. "J.R.'s got a real mix of hill country charm and a deviousness that creeps up on you. I can't wait to see what he's gonna do next."

THE PRODUCTION

With a bare-bones budget, the production team knew they would have to use their ingenuity – and the chilly splendor of the surrounding landscape – to their advantage. "I've always been a fan of films that rejected looking slick just for the sake of production value," says Schattel. "Films like *Breaking the Waves*, with its beautifully washed-out handheld vibe, and *Tender Mercies*, with its quiet, open spaces, helped infuse the story we were trying to tell. *Sinkhole* is not about the mystical beauty of a winter landscape – as a story it's as direct and single-minded as the film's title. This isn't about finding poetry in the way ice crystals form on bare tree branches, this is about a working man's perspective on his world – trailer parks, parking lots, convenience stores."

In that manner, the *Sinkhole* crew didn't want too many fluid dolly moves or lyrical shots. "We went after a simplicity in the staging of the scenes – longer takes, semi-static shots, hand-held compositions. We felt the inertia of the story itself would keep people watching, so we felt okay about wanting the movie to inhabit the same brusque quality that Jason is feeling – the lack of grace, the dearth of poetry. It's all about bringing to life what our lead character is experiencing."

That sensibility carried over to the editing as well. "To work with the underscoring of the story we wanted a simple, straightforward editing scheme. There was no sleight of hand – we wanted a no-nonsense feel to the way the film was cut together. Again, we went back to Kubrick – how his shots often just abruptly cut in, rather than segueing here or there. So rather than dissolving to gloriously bare trees and panning over to the action, we'd usually cut into the scene right away, and when the action was over, we'd cut away. Simple as that."

CINEMATOGRAPHY AND PRODUCTION DESIGN

"Western North Carolina in the winter months is a wonderfully bleak place," says Schattel, "almost monochromatic. Instead of fighting the landscape, we wanted to work with it – so we knew that our primary colors would be brown and white, or brown and denim blue. That way the bleached, near-colorlessness of the landscape would be used to echo Jason's own emotional life."

"Steve Agnew, the DP, and I drew up an almost run-and-gun scheme where we would use available light, augmenting what was already in place with just a few practicals here and there," Schattel explains. "If we shot in a convenience store, we wanted the lighting to look like it really does. In the landfill breakroom and bathroom locations, we used the lighting that was actually there, even letting the fluorescents go green in the color-timing. Again and again, we shied away from glamour and beauty and highlighted the gritty reality of every location."

Locations were minimally dressed, allowing the crew to get the most out of each place as it really was. "The landfill office interiors are actually the production offices of Asheville's Blue Ridge Motion Pictures," Schattel explains. "It's a quasi-industrial space that has the messy authenticity of a working plant. Our set dressers took down a few camera charts and simply hung up a few calendars here and there. We got an F.4 on the light meter, and went to work."

Other locations were also used as is. "Poppy's house is the home of Linda Jean Marlowe, our Art Director," Schattel explains. "She lives in this funky old place on a mountain in the middle of nowhere. When we saw her abandoned pool out back, we knew we'd hit paydirt."

Costuming was particularly important, down to Alfonse's brown pleather jacket. "There's a certain ridiculousness to Alfonse - he's larger than life, at least in his own mind. So you have the muscle car, you have the pleather jacket, but the guy probably goes home to the worst, dingiest place imaginable." To echo his no-nonsense personality, Jason's wardrobe was kept muted - coveralls and denim, and his ever-present oil-stained blue jacket. "At the risk of being too minimalist, we wanted these characters to wear things they really would wear. Pris' wardrobe is downright unglamorous, and the young girl Irene wears earth-toned sweats and pajamas - things a girl in her situation really wears."

CONCLUSION

“Really, the whole question of *Sinkhole*’s style comes down to a restrained and – hopefully – realistic point of view,” Schattel says. “In the acting, in the production design, in the locations and even the set-ups, we constantly chose the subdued and unglamorous over the cinematic and hyper-real. As a director, I’m interested in the small, authentic moments much more than any hip or flashy style. By turning away from any ‘movie moments,’ we tried to create something that was a bit more subtle and hard to get at.

“Of course, it’s up to you to determine whether we succeeded.”

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SINKHOLE BIOS

PAUL SCHATTEL

A native of Birmingham, Alabama, Paul has always been interested in the language of storytelling, graduating college with a B.A. in English Literature and Film Studies from the University of Montevallo in rural Alabama. A journalist, video editor, director and producer by trade, Schattel has written novels, countless short stories, and more screenplays than you can shake a stick at. He has also been a finalist for the Sundance Writer's/Director's Workshop for his next 35mm film project, *Harvestman*. Having made several celebrated short films, his first feature, the digital *78* (2000), premiered to great enthusiasm and much raucousness in his adopted hometown of Asheville, North Carolina. An avowed country music addict, Schattel enjoys his son Jacob, his wife Christine, and the ontological phenomenology of empty sunlit rooms, in that order.

STEVE AGNEW

Steve Agnew and his production company, Rock Creek Productions, have been a major force in the Washington, DC, film and video scene for over a decade. Working primarily in high-end industrials and government videos, Steve has made a point to inject creative (and often nightmarish) imagery into the heads of our government bureaucrats. Possessing a B.A. in English, Steve is largely a self-taught cinematographer, having forged his distinctive style by helming projects for such clients as The Smithsonian Institute, National Geographic, The BBC, Broderbund, the EPA and others. *Sinkhole* is his first feature film.

BRYAN MARSHALL

A native of Asheville, North Carolina, Bryan is a long-haul trucker, small business owner, and lead singer of one of Western North Carolina's most popular bands, the classic country combo The Gone Wrongs. A graduate of Warren Wilson College, Bryan has appeared in numerous stage productions, and as Gene in Paul Schattel's first feature, *78*. *Sinkhole* is his first lead role in a feature film.

ROBIN SPRIGGS

With stage credits including Hamlet, Romeo and other classic heroes, Robin's has appeared on the big and little screen in such productions as *Double Threat* and *I'll Fly Away*. Robin has also appeared as the Joker in Time-Warner's live-action Batman Stunt Spectacular, and as George Jetson in the official kickoff of Cable TV's Cartoon Network. An accomplished and celebrated author, Robin has written two books and been published in numerous anthologies and magazines. His latest volume, *Wondrous Strange: Tales of the Uncanny*, was short-listed for the prestigious Bram Stoker Award, cited for honors in "The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror" and continues to haunt the dreams of readers worldwide.

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SINKHOLE CAST

Jason	BRYAN MARSHALL
Alfonse	ROBIN SPRIGGS
Pris	KELLY O'NEAL
Poppy	J.R. HOOPER
Bob White	PATRICK GREEN
Irene	CAITLIN ROSE
Commissioner Whitley	DAVID GANTT
Billy G.	FRANK MARSHALL
Earl	JOSHUA P. WARREN
Sandra	STEPHANIE BELT
Vernon	FRED BUCH
Linda	LEONA STERN
Irene's Father	WILLIAM PALKO
Gail	HOLLY MARLOWE
Secretary	TAMMY HOPKINS
Liz	TERRA KIRK
Gates	CHIP BARRETT
Ray	DAVID MACDONALD
Poston	MICHAEL GODLESKI
Jill	VIRGINIA PAYNE

SINKHOLE CREW

Writer/Director	PAUL SCHATTEL
Director of Photography	STEVE AGNEW
Production Designer	PEARSON HOBART-BEAUMARI
Art Director/Makeup	LINDA JEAN MARLOWE
Location Audio	REBECCA MACNEICE
Executive Producer	CHRISTINE BANMAN
Line Producer	FRANK MCQUARRIE
1 st AC	GREG HUDGINS
2 nd AC	TERESA VILLA
Video Assist	SHANE MEADOR
Grip	LESLIE BOCK
Script Supervision	VIRGINIA PAYNE
Casting	MICHAEL MORBID CASTING
Casting Assistance	LEE NESBITT
Locations	BEATRICE HUNT
Music	JASON SMITH
Featuring Songs by	RICHARD BUCKNER
Additional Music by	THE LOWDOWN TRAVELERS
1 st Assistant Director	KATHLEEN 'BO" BOBAK
2 nd Unit Director	DAVE COLE
2 nd Unit DP	GREG HUDGINS
Director's Assistant	BREAH PARKER
Still Photography	ROBERT GOERKE
Digital Compositing	KLEIN DIGITAL

Vehicles
Equipment

ACES HIGH AUTOS
ELJAPA MEDIA
MIKE TEETERS

Graphic Design

ROBERT GOERKE

Post Audio Supervisor
Post Audio Mixer

VANESSA LAPATO
JOHN JOSEPH THOMAS

Production Consultant

OLIVER MEDIA

Film Processing
Cameras/Lenses

CINEFILM LAB, ATLANTA, GA
SILVER HAMMER STUDIOS

Legal Services

JERRY GERNIGAN, ESQ.

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