

ROLL CALL: *Blueberries for Iris*



Director Zoe Cleland plants a surreal thriller in rural Newfoundland



From "Blueberries for Iris" - Cinematography by Chet Tilokani

Next to my mother's house in Newfoundland, there is a large area of coastal barrens that is breathtakingly beautiful. Bradley's Cove is a town that was "resettled" in the 1960s—in other words, the original inhabitants picked up their houses and left. What remains of this area is reminiscent of something from *Wuthering Heights*, where you can still find the rocky foundations of an old church and school, abandoned to nature.

The haunting landscape inspired me to write and direct *Blueberries for Iris*, shot on location, a short psychological thriller about a woman who becomes mysteriously lost with a stranger while blueberry picking. The story is partly based on Irish fairy lore, and partly on my own lifelong battle with mental health. It dips in and out of the surreal, as my goal was to fuse the lonely beauty of the area with the internal reality of one woman's mind as she struggles to process a traumatic event.

I play Iris, starring opposite Thomas Antony Olajide (*Learn to Swim*). Katherine Wilson, my creative partner-in-crime, helped me produce, and Ruth Lawrence, a powerhouse in the Newfoundland film community, took on the task of mentoring us.

Blueberries for Iris was produced by Sweet Sorrow Productions and Blue Pinion Films; look for it on the film festival circuit in 2023. — Zoe Cleland, Director.

THOMAS ANTONY OLAJIDE - Actor (Fin)

sM | What effect did this landscape have on how you approached this project?

TAO — I approach any project knowing that there are some things that can't be acted, namely the effect the environment



Thomas Antony Olajide by Vita Cooper

will have on my body in a scene on any given day. It could be argued that performance is simply the chemical reaction between the body and its environment, made visible to an audience. Any preparation on my part that's done is done with the sole aim of facilitating that chemical reaction as much as possible, and hopefully allowing it to be seen by the audience. So my preparation for *Blueberries for Iris* was done in that spirit.

CHET TILOKANI - Director of Photography

sM | *Blueberries for Iris* can be characterised as surrealist cinema; as a cinematographer and visual artist, what attracts you to this style of filmmaking?

CT — What really captivated me about working on a surrealist visual piece like *Blueberries for Iris* was that it felt like we were exploring un-ventured creative paths. Western cinema has a very defined language and set of conventions for storytelling and few films stray from relying on these. This script read like something that required breaking conventions to illustrate effectively. There is a level of freedom I feel when



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working in a visual language where you make your own conventions and rules. It allows me to think and justify my choices in the world of the story rather than how they make sense in the real world. My framing, composition, lighting placement and colours aren't constrained by reality, but are challenged by it on an emotional level. I get to ask myself "What does this reality *feel* like?" and answer it with the images I get to create.

PAT DEMPSEY - Actor ("The Man")

sM | The scenes you had to do as an actor were particularly challenging, as they depicted moments of intimate partner abuse and violence. What role do you think film has in exploring these kinds of issues?

PD — I react to how often sexual abuse is shown in media, in movies, and works of fiction, and on the news. I worry when it's overused for shock value. But of course, the opposite of that would be not to depict this stuff at all and to be mute about the whole thing. Stories are the building blocks of society, we define ourselves through stories, we record our own history through our stories. It's how we learn lessons, how we grow. So to not talk about a certain thing is not

constructive, it does not open us up for education or learning. It doesn't kill ignorance. And it doesn't give those who have experienced this type of trauma an avenue to be able to share. It would keep more people quiet if this stuff was not being talked about at all, as we've seen in prior generations.

For me, it was definitely a challenging thing to work through as an actor, to position myself as that character. But what I really liked about the script was that violence wasn't used for sensationalism, and there were a lot of choices to not show much, to let the mind fill in the terror, to rely on the audience to be mature enough to fill in the blanks.

RUTH LAWRENCE - Producer | Mentor | Actor (Grace)

sM | What drives you to mentor emerging artists on the level that you do?

RL — There is no doubt it comes from growing up in a very small outpost, in a very large and loving family, but where there were very few mentors at the start of my artistic journey. I still managed to find wonderful people who inspired and challenged me. All the way through my education and early career, I was very fortunate to have many senior artists who saw something

in me that they wanted to support and nurture. Suddenly I had a community.

In 2011, I had just won ArtsNL's Artist of the Year Award and a journalist asked me what I would do now. I answered that I would mentor others. I don't know why that was my response, but I held myself to that promise. In the same way that others feel chosen by their life's



Ruth Lawrence by Ritche Perez

passion, I had a calling to be an artist. If I recognize that passion for creation in others, I feel compelled to support them. Zoe and Katherine lured me with their vision and their plan. It was irresistible. To be a part of launching a young artist's dream project, why would I turn away from that moment?



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