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Sister-Wives Rise Up Against a Charismatic Cult Leader in the Horror-Thriller *Hell Is Empty*

NEW YORK - In *Hell Is Empty*, a self-styled messiah (Travis Mitchell) initiates a lost soul (Spencer Peppet) into his cult of sister-wives on a secluded island, upsetting the delicate balance of a utopian community fixated on sin and salvation. The horror-thriller is set in a sinister farmhouse surrounded by Edenic wilderness, so no ordinary soundstage would do. New York filmmakers Jo Shaffer and Adam DeSantes had to find that farmhouse.

Shaffer and DeSantes scouted out a long-deserted dwelling on a swamp in small-town Indiana, a stone's throw from Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. It was a place where innocence and evil might clash amid peeling wallpaper, creaking staircases, and a natural paradise just outside the rotting front door. After propping up the floor and clearing out the poisonous spiders, the filmmakers created a gripping tale of deliverance that draws its power from this haunted location.

Director-cowriter Shaffer (they/them) won the top prize at the 2015 Wisconsin Film Festival for *The Searcher*. Their solo films and productions with DeSantes have screened at the Los Angeles Film Festival, Austin Film Festival, Sarasota Film Festival, Juggernaut Film Festival, and Chicago CineYouth Film Festival. Their work has been featured in *IndieWire* and praised by *The Wisconsin State Journal*, *The Capital Times*, *Isthmus*, *Lake Front Row*, and Wisconsin Public Television.

Peppet, who stars as a new sister-wife increasingly suspicious of The Artist's motives, leads the acclaimed indie pop band The Ophelias. The band, which collaborated on the film's evocative score, has been featured on National Public Radio and the TV series *Never Have I Ever*, along with earning rave reviews in *The New York Times* and *Pitchfork*.

Nia Farrell, founder of New York City's Downtown Negro theater company, plays the pregnant Saratoga, who cult members believe is carrying the Son of God. After questioning her role as virgin mother, Saratoga transforms from outcast to avenger during a harrowing escape.

Mitchell, who stars as a charismatic cult leader known to his followers as "The Artist," has appeared in the TV series *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, *Ghost Light*, and *Small Miracles*.