

HELL IS EMPTY

# Short Synopsis

A self-styled messiah initiates a teenage runaway into his cult of sister-wives, upsetting the delicate balance of a utopian community fixated on sin and salvation. As the makeshift family descends into paranoia and violence, two of the women plot a daring escape that transforms them from outcasts to avengers.

# Long Synopsis

In *Hell Is Empty*, a self-styled messiah initiates a lost soul into his cult of sister-wives on an Edenic island, upsetting the delicate balance of a utopian community fixated on sin and salvation. Combining edge-of-your-seat suspense with arthouse flair, the horror-thriller follows two teenage runaways who become increasingly suspicious of the cult leader's absolutist vision.

When Lydia arrives on the island, Saratoga is eight months pregnant with his child—the supposed “son of God.” As the makeshift family descends into paranoia and violence, Lydia and Saratoga plot a daring escape that transforms them from outcasts to avengers.

# Characters



## Murphy (Aya)

Abandoned at a young age, Murphy grew up alone in the forest. Ed found her in a near-feral state, adopted her into the family, and tasked her with hunting small game. Unable to speak, Murphy relies on body language to communicate.

## Millie (Meredith Antoian)

As Ed's least favorite sister wife, Millie resents living on the island. She hates and fears Ed, undercutting his messianic pronouncements.

## Saratoga (Nia Farrell)

Former pageant queen and current favorite wife, Saratoga is pregnant with Ed's child. She grows close to Lydia, hoping to save her from eternal damnation.

## Ed (Travis Mitchell)

The self-appointed messiah and patriarch. Ed spends most of his time up in the attic, skimming the Book of Revelations. He's charming, manipulative, and violent when threatened. Ed prefers the moniker of "Artist."

## Lydia (Spencer Peppet)

Lydia is a fiery teenage runaway who becomes the family's newest sister wife. Initially, Lydia enjoys the stability and fellowship of the family. Ed's increasing paranoia forces her to rebel against its oppressive structure.

## Vivian (Laura Resinger)

The first and oldest wife, Vivian functions as a grudging lieutenant. She recently suffered a miscarriage and resents Saratoga for carrying "the Messiah's child." Vivian struggles to balance her innate decency with Ed's increasingly violent demands.

# The Cult



The family views moving to the island as a creation myth.



Ed found a tiny island in Lake Superior, which he considers Eden.



The family stumbled on the abandoned house and fixed it up. Technically, they're squatters.



Ed believes that his first child will trigger Judgment Day.



Cut off from the outside world, the family relies on hunting and farming to eat.



The family expects Judgment Day in the form of nuclear war.



Ed despises the outside world. He felt martyred by modernity and strives to shut it out.

# Director's Statement

Once an idyllic homestead, our location had fallen into disrepair. Poison spiders and used syringes dotted the property. Rotting support beams threatened the structural integrity of the house. The process of transforming this mess into a safe, viable shooting location looked like a full-time job.

Unfortunately, we didn't have the money to hire a full-time crew. We didn't even have the money to hire a part-time crew. Instead, the job fell to producer Adam DeSantes and me. One more problem: we were both in college on the East Coast and the location was in Indiana. It would take a meticulous plan, plus a spark of insanity, to make this work. Luckily, we had both. Over the course of a year, we made pilgrimages to the farmhouse during breaks from school.

In winter, we spent hours in the freezing cold, making scrupulous floor plans and capturing panoramic images of the property. I spent the spring building a 3D scale model of the property in Maya to help with set design and storyboarding. My grades suffered as a result. In summer, we strapped on our masks and began to clear out the debris that had collected after years of neglect. I conquered my fear of spiders on the day we inspected every nook and cranny for brown recluses, spraying them with Raid as we went.

As our August shoot date loomed, we accrued a fantastic team of collaborators, all under 30, all working for dirt-cheap or for free. With camaraderie, dedication, and a healthy dose of caution, we turned the dilapidated farmhouse into a home fit for the subject of our film, a doomsday cult obsessed with iconography.

For all its challenges, our Indiana farmhouse had a spectacular, haunting charm. The house was built in the 1800s. Old-growth forest surrounds the bulk of the property. It feels lost in time. You can't fake decades of decay. We didn't have to.

*Hell Is Empty* is born of fanatical devotion to a cause--an ironic parallel to our main characters. This movie might be more personal than we intended.

# Crew



**ADAM DESANTES (PRODUCER, HE/HIM)** is a Brooklyn-based producer and editor. He has been creating films since he was eleven years old and collaborating with best friend and creative partner Jo Shaffer on projects since he was fifteen. While studying film and psychology at Wesleyan University, DeSantes produced his first feature film, *Calliope*, a micro-budget sci-fi thriller that premiered at Chicago's Juggernaut Film Festival. He began developing *Hell Is Empty* with Shaffer during his senior year and shot the film immediately after graduating. In addition to his work in film, DeSantes designs interactive experiences for computers and VR.



**JO SHAFFER (DIRECTOR, THEY/THEM)** studied film at New York University's Tisch School for the Performing Arts. Their music videos have appeared in the New York Times, Stereogum, Paste, and other online publications. Their feature film *Calliope* was selected for the Juggernaut Film Festival, Chicago's science fiction and fantasy film festival. Shaffer's short film "The Searcher" won the top prize in the Wisconsin Film Festival's adult category, making them the youngest such prize winner in the festival's history. Their short films have also screened at the L.A. Film Festival, Austin Film Festival, Chicago International Film Festival, and Sarasota Film Festival. Shaffer is a member of the band The Ophelias, which has been praised by the New York Times and appeared on the soundtrack of the Netflix series *Never Have I Ever*.

# Crew



**JASON DREVER (EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, HE/HIM)** is a physician who began film and television production in 2016. Notable projects include *Under the Silver Lake*, which premiered at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival; *#Unfit: The Psychology of Donald Trump*; and *The Outpost*, which is currently airing on the CW network.



**ALEX HALSTEAD (DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY, HE/HIM)** is an award winning cinematographer based in Chicago, Illinois. Since graduating from Columbia College Chicago for film production with a concentration in cinematography, he has been working professionally as a director of photography on a variety of narrative features, shorts, music videos and documentaries.



**SOFIE SOMOROFF (COSTUME & PRODUCTION DESIGNER, SHE/HER)** is a LA-based filmmaker and NYC-born bagel aficionado. Since shifting her focus from designing to directing, recent work includes “Love is a Fire,” a horror short about an acidic yeast infection (currently in post-production); *My First Night in LA*, a musical about a girl learning self-love while crashing at a friend’s place; its sequel, “My Worst Night in LA,” about needing to poop while on a Hinge date; and “CUT,” a sci-fi short based on her grandmother’s experience in a home for unwed mothers in the 60s.

# Cast



**SPENCER PEPPET (LYDIA, SHE/HER)** Spencer Peppet is an actor, musician, and writer from Cincinnati, currently living in New York. She graduated from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in the Experimental Theatre Wing. Her band The Ophelias released their sophomore album *Almost* in 2018 to glowing reviews in *The New York Times*, NPR, Pitchfork, and others, and an EP *For Luck* in 2020 recorded entirely in the band members' separate quarantine locations. She has been writing, watching *Survivor*, and reading a lot in the past year.

**NIA FARRELL (SARATOGA, SHE/THEY)** is a creator, performer, and Mundane Afrofuturist who develops new work that celebrates the dreams, stories, and ancestry of Blk communities. Their ritual-based work is rooted in the abundance of radical imagination and the power of actualizing dreams. As a creator and/or performer, Nia has collaborated with Soho Rep (Writer/ Director Lab; *A Map To Nowhere - Things Are*), Theater Mitu (Hybrid Arts Lab; *Will To The World*), Ars Nova (ANT Fest; *Dreams in Blk Major*), Theatertreffen Stückemarkt, and more. Alongside their artistic soulmate, Talia Paulette Oliveras, they also make work as Ta-Nia: a theatre-making duo dedicated to making Blk space in an anti-Blk society. When she is not dreaming and scheming Afro-futures, Nia is the Development Coordinator for Nine Muses Entertainment. More: [niafarrell.com](http://niafarrell.com)



**TRAVIS MITCHELL (ED, HE/HIM)** is thrilled to be a part of "Hell Is Empty". Originally from Wisconsin, Travis has been making his home in New York City for the past 24 years with his wife Juliana. Most recently, he was seen as Sgt. Matthews (opposite Mariska Hargitay) on *Law and Order SVU*. Recent awards: Outstanding Achievement: Acting, LA International FF, "Theo: Beyond Expression"; Craft Award Best Actor, First Run Film Festival, "The Spinning Man", which is now on the festival circuit.

# Cast



**LAURA RESINGER (VIVIAN, SHE/HER)** Laura Resinger is a Chicago-based actor where she has performed with theatre companies Remy Bumppo, Strawdog, Cor Theatre, ATC, and Silk Road Rising. Regionally, she has appeared with Shakespeare Festival St. Louis. She holds an MFA in Acting from DePaul University and is a certified Lessac Voice Practitioner.



**AYA (MURPHY, THEY/THEM)** A mixed-blood baby born on lutruwita land of the palawa people (Tasmania, AUS), AYA stands firm in their identity as a trans-non-binary Japanese-Australian artist seeking self-understanding and acceptance in ancestral forces. Since graduating from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, AYA has worked professionally as a theatre-maker, director, organiser, choreographer, and performer in NYC and Australia. A current company member of The Dance Cartel, AYA has progressed to develop, direct, and perform in a series of devised dance-theatre pieces themed around death in living, dreaming, and rebirth, in collaboration with NY-based emerging artists of the LGBTQIA+ community; CODA (2018, NY), CIDE (2019, Off-Off-Broadway, NY), and Butterfly Soup (2019, Victoria).



**MEREDITH ANTOIAN (MILLIE, SHE/HER)** Meredith Antioian is an NYC based actress and NYU Tisch alum. Notable credits include: Zach Braff's *Going in Style*, NBC's *Blindspot*, ABC's *The Family*, and the Off-Broadway premiere of *Must*. She loves her niece and nephews, Lord of the Rings, cats, and dessert (not necessarily in that order.)

# Stills

Full resolution stills can be found on our website at  
[www.divineimg.com/hellisempty/presskit](http://www.divineimg.com/hellisempty/presskit)



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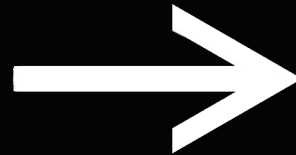


# The Location

## ED'S ROOM



We used a 360-degree camera to capture images of each room in the house, allowing us to precisely plan production design and determine shots.

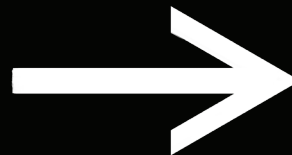


The house had been abandoned for over a decade. Before filming, we had to remove trash, insulation, and other debris. A family of raccoons declined to leave but luckily didn't bother us.

## KITCHEN



The kitchen was in the worst shape, requiring massive rehabilitation to meet safety standards. We hired a cleaning crew to remove the toxic stuff and did the rest ourselves.



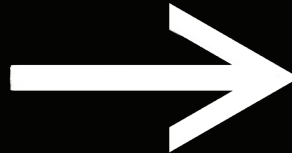
Our art department managed to turn this crumbling room into the cult's hearth.

# The Location

## CELLAR



The scene of our largest battle with the brown recluse spiders.



It may not have been clean, but we managed to get rid of anything dangerous.

## PRAAYER HUT



A week before shooting, we realized the roof was collapsing. Luckily, our buddy helped us whip up a new roof in a couple days.



In the end, partially rebuilding the hut gave us better control over the color scheme.

# Pre-Visualization

The large number of fight scenes, combined with our low budget and tight schedule, necessitated accurate and comprehensive storyboards. To meet this challenge, Jo built a scale model of the entire house in Maya. This allowed the director and director of photography to better plan coverage and lens choices.



# Behind The Scenes



◀ Sunset at the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, where the beachside scenes were filmed.

▼ (Left) Adam DeSantes (left) and Jo Shaffer (right) smiling on set during a break.

▼ (Center) Laura Resinger (left) and Aya (right) with bloody make-up and costumes.

▼ (Right) Maya Nudo (left), a grip, and Paige Hochstatter (right), a camera operator, on the cliffs near Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore.



# Behind The Scenes: On Set



▲ (Top) Second assistant director Luana Borges (right) keeps Spencer Peppet (left) company while her hair is tied up in the cellar.

▲ (Bottom) Close up on Spencer Peppet's hair as it's tied to the pole in the center of the cellar.



▲ (Top) The crew gathers for a 2 am lunch during an overnight shoot.

▲ (Bottom) Producer Adam DeSantes wades into the muck of an algae-covered pond to assess its depth during a location scout for the film's climax.



▲ (Top) Aya, Laura Resinger, Spencer Peppet, Nia Farrell, and Meredith Antoian posing for a photo on their way to the first day of shooting.

▲ (Bottom) The crew huddles below a bounce to take shelter from an unexpected shower.

▶ (Top) The crew gathers for a lake-side lunch on a day off.

▶ (Bottom) Director Jo Shaffer (left) watches as Travis Mitchell (center), who plays Ed, practices fight choreography.



# Credits

Directed by  
**Jo Shaffer**

Written by  
**Jo Shaffer and Adam DeSantes**

Produced by  
**Adam DeSantes**

Executive Produced by  
**Jason Dreyer**

**Spencer Peppet** as Lydia

**Nia Farrell** as Saratoga

**Travis Mitchell** as Ed

**Laura Resinger** as Vivian

**AYA** as Murphy

**Meredith Antoian** as Millie

**Liam Ouweleen** as the Fisherman

**Matthew Williams** as the Mainland Fisherman

Director of Photography  
**Alex Halstead**

Production Designer  
**Sofie Somoroff**

Edited by  
**Joe Shaffer and Adam DeSantes**

Associate Producer  
**Andrew Skalak**

Costume Design by  
**Sofie Somoroff**

Score Composed by  
**Spencer Peppet**

First Assistant Director  
**Saró Melero Bonnin**

Second Assistant Director  
**Luana Borges**

Production Manager  
**Mika Santiaguel**

Production Assistants  
**Nick Andros**  
**Caley Mulligan**

Stunt Coordinator  
**Brian Barber**

Makeup Artist  
**Donnelly Tullis**

Set Dresser  
**Emma Cantor**

Props Master  
**Eli Sands**

Art Assistant  
**Hayley Reece**

Gaffer  
**Zach Alsen**

Additional Gaffer  
**Matt Hayward**

Best Boy / Driver  
**Andrew Skalak**

Grips  
**Maya Nudo**  
**John Jadcowski**  
**Batoul Odeh**  
**Pouya Shahbazi**

Camera Operator  
**Alex Halstead**  
**Luke Dyra**  
**Paige Hochstatter**  
**Jana McLain**

1st AC  
**Katrina Mulligan**  
**Paige Hochstatter**  
**Jordan Graves**  
**JP O'Rourke**

2nd AC  
**Jordan Graves**  
**Yon Ziebarth**  
**Garrett Garcia**

Sound Mixer  
**Jacob Brown**

Boom Operators  
**Garrett Stepp**  
**João Pedro Peirera-Webber**

Post Production Coordinator  
**Danielle Benedict**

Colorist  
**Neil Shukla**

Visual Effects by  
**Jo Shaffer**  
**Danielle Benedict**  
**Adam DeSantes**

Dialogue Editor  
**Danielle Benedict**

Sound Effects  
Editor **Rae King**

Music Editor  
**Vaneeda Keowmang**

Musicians

**Micaela Adams**  
**Andrew Boylan**  
**Jeff Peppet**  
**Jo Shaffer**  
**Spencer Peppet**  
**John Hoffman**  
**Nina Payiatis**  
**Peter Boylan**  
**Andrea Gutmann Fuentes**  
**Ben Sloan**

Score Recorded By  
**John Hoffman**

Song Credits

Catering by  
**Nicole Boyd**  
**Melody Shaffer**  
**David Shaffer**  
**Dean Robbins**  
**Ann Shaffer**

Special Thanks to  
**Ann Shaffer and Dean Robbins,**  
**Ken and Kathy DeSantes,**  
**Wendy and Richard Robertson,**  
**Natalie Sumara, Joe Voss,**  
**Christopher Johnson,**  
**Thomas Scott, Matt Williams**

Score Recorded at  
**The Lodge KY**

Re-recording Mix at  
**Postworks New York**

# Contact

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