

BACK STAGE WEST

Thomas Hildreth always knew that the rugged Maine island of Vinalhaven would make a stunning backdrop for a movie. Growing up, he often spent summers there, and he's still very much in tune with the area's distinct rhythms. His deep respect for and connection to the island is fully on display in *Islander*, the moody, atmospheric festival favorite he co-wrote, produced, and stars in. With its sweeping gray skies and rough-edged landscapes, Vinalhaven isn't just *Islander's* primary location; it is also a major character in the film.



“Having grown up there, I was really sensitive to rhythm and accents and pacing within the dialogue,” says Hildreth. “There’s a real certain kind of low-key, dry, understated language that these people use, and it’s for real, it’s not made up. But the thing is, oftentimes, when New England – and Maine, particularly – gets portrayed in Hollywood, people tend to get quaint with it, they tend to get cute. They make people sound kind of caricature-like. We really tried to keep it grounded in reality.”

The film, which was co-written and directed by Ian McCrudden, centers on Eben Cole (Hildreth), a longtime fisherman with a loving wife (Amy Jo Johnson) and a young daughter. When mainland fishermen encroach on the territory reserved for island-dwellers, temperamental Eben attempts to settle

the score, resulting in a tragic accident and a prison sentence. He returns home five years later and must deal with a close-knit community that doesn't want anything to do with him.

“[Ian and I] were both interested in a drama, in a straightforward, serious story that would be appropriate for grownups...” says Hildreth. “It was obvious that making it with a lobstering

background, a fishing background, was completely appropriate, because this community is all about fishing... As for the story itself, we kicked around a bunch of ideas, but what we found most compelling was this idea of the territory wars and the righting that goes on out there on territory, on lobstering rights. We had

become aware of some historical lobster wars that had happened over the years, and we were being told about some conflicts going on currently. So the idea for the whole story came from that, and it also came from people who had done time and come back to the island. I was keen on that idea; the idea of a guy coming back to face his community we found very compelling.

Island Fever

Hildreth has a strong theatre-focused resume. He had performed extensively with the Williamstown Theatre Festival, the Berkshire Theatre Festival, and the Classical Theatre Lab in Los Angeles, and has appeared on such television shows as *24* and *Numbers*. In addition to wanting to tell a story set in Vinalhaven, he says, the desire to make *Islander* came out of “being an actor for

years and years and doing character parts, smaller parts, not really getting the shot at many leads, especially in the professional market, and really wanting to take creative control that way.”

Hildreth and McCrudden first worked together about six years ago, when Hildreth was featured in *Mr. Smith Gets a Hustler*, a play directed by McCrudden that was later made into a movie. The two found that they collaborated well and shared a similar vision for a feature film project. “We just wanted to really build something together that we could get our teeth into as a director and as an actor, and we knew that we would have to own it and write our own piece and create it that way,” says Hildreth.

Casting the film was a fairly organic process. “We went after people we knew, particularly people I worked with in theatre in LA and New York,” explains Hildreth. Several primary cast members came from Classical Theatre Lab: Ron Canada, who plays Eben’s defense attorney; James Parks, who makes a lasting impression as Eben’s sternman, Pokey; and Philip Baker Hall, who portrays elderly fisherman Popper. “I’d worked with Philip in the Classical Theatre Lab and done Greek tragedies with him and some of the other actors that were in the cast,” says Hildreth, who’s based now in LA. “The thing about some of these stage actors – and speaking of myself as well – is that we tend to be more adept at the dialogue, at the accents and the character work.” Adding to the film’s authenticity, several case members were Maine locals, including newcomer Emma Ford as Eben’s daughter, Sara.

Hildreth and McCrudden secured independent financing out on Maine, and the film was shot on Panasonic VariCam HD over the course of 25 days. The filmmakers were thrilled to find the community of Vinalhaven welcoming and helpful, offering script advice, boat rentals, and more. “[We got] some tips on the script from locals in terms of very specific language, jargon, as it relates to fishing...” recalls Hildreth. “Nobody had shot there in, like, 50 years. They made a feature film called *Deep Waters* with Cesar Romero in the 1940s, but they hadn’t been inundated with film crews. We got there and shot the movie before July 4 – in other words, before the lobstering became busy again... The lobstermen had a little extra time on their hands’ so they were able to make a few extra bucks working with us on our shoot with their boats and stuff.”

Save for the scenes of Eben in prison, *islander* was shot primarily in Vinalhaven. “We wrote the movie for the locations,” says Hildreth. “The island basically served as a giant movie set. We just went downtown and over to the wharf and up to the school, and these were our locations, and the fortunately, everybody was on board, ‘cause we didn’t have any other choices. It wasn’t like, ‘Oh, we can use this other school,’ because there was no other school.”

The Whole Story

Though starring in a film while also serving as co-writer and producer is a daunting task, Hildreth found that he didn’t have much time to think about it on-set. “I was producing in between takes, producing at lunch break, making decisions and having to do that stuff,” he says. “And the only reason that I was

able to do that and show up as the actor at the same time was because I was co-writer on the movie, and I had been developing the script and the character for three years... Ian would tweak me and turn me and direct me this way or that way, but we were already very clear with each other on who the guy was.”

Hildreth believes that it’s important for actors to create their own work because, he says, “There’s clearly not enough work to go around for the number of actors out there, and I think actors need to create. We’re creative people, we’re hungry for that... There’s so much to be said for creating your own destiny.”

That philosophy seems to have paid off: The film has already inspired raves at the Los Angeles Film Festival and a screening in Maine, and the filmmakers hope to screen it at other festivals and secure distribution. McCrudden theorizes one reason *Islander* works so well is that although Hildreth central performance was key, all the other elements of the film were treated with equal care. “Hildreth really reached out and helped create a whole story... The whole movie became a collaboration beyond the desire to have a good role for him, and I think that’s why it was successful,” says McCrudden. “[The central performance] was important, but so were so many of the other aspects of making a whole movie and having it be truthful and authentic and real.”

For Hildreth, the ability to convey an affecting story within a world he’s intimately familiar with was perhaps the most important aspect of all. “This project was personally so meaningful to me,” he says. “It’s kind of a secret world that I grew up in that I was actually able

to create with my collaborators – Ian in particular – and share it with the world.”