

Paul Gross goes from mud to dust in latest movie *Gunless*

Star finds B.C. desert and funny script are welcome change from *Passchendaele* set

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Osoyoos, B.C.—Paul Gross is having a bad hair day.

Blame the arid desert in the south Okanagan. Blame the dust and the wind. But matted, lanky extensions, while befitting the look of a gunslinger named the Montana Kid, aren't holding up well.

"This dust and dirt get into everything," says Gross, on the movie set of his upcoming comedy/western *Gunless*. "I don't mind the dust but it's what comes with it. You can't wear glasses, it's hard on your eyes and it's hell on the hair."

Gross's character is an American shoot-'em-up kind of guy who is dragged across the border by his horse and finds himself in the fictional town of Barclay's Brush, where the inhabitants are unarmed Canadians.

The decision to shoot the movie in the arid Okanagan can be directly linked to *Passchendaele*, Gross's successful 2008 release that he wrote, directed and produced. Producer Niv Fichman of Rhombus Media Inc., which also produced *Passchendaele*, remembers the seemingly endless days of mud and rain that characterized the World War I movie.

"Shooting in a desert-like area in wine country made a lot of sense after *Passchendaele*," Fichman says.

"A western out here, in this spot where you can see nothing but hills and this incredible scenery, was the perfect solution."

The dry, dusty location had everyone on the crew well aware of why real cowboys wore handkerchiefs and hats, says Stephen Heyges of Brightlight Pictures, the co-producers of the film.

"This is the Sonoran Desert, which goes all the way from Mexico to B.C.," he says.

"Niv and I have been talking about working together for a long time and he was standing in a rain tower shooting for *Passchendaele* when we were talking about the script and the idea of a western appealed to both of us.

"Normally, you want to keep it close to home and not be overly complicated and, at first, we couldn't see how we could make it work in Osoyoos. But everyone pitched in and we figured it out and we couldn't be happier with the results.

"When we see the dailies, the location plays such a huge part of this film."

The five-week shoot, which ended two weeks ago, was the biggest production this region had seen, and included building the town of Barclay's Bush complete with saloon, school house and doctor's residence.

Outside of the fictional town is the ranch run by British actor Sienna Guillory's character Jane. Guillory says the Okanagan reminded her vividly of the terrain in Slovakia where one of her previous movies, *Eragon*, was shot.

"When I first got here and driving in, all I could think of was, 'My God, it's stunningly beautiful here.'"

Guillory says she was intrigued by the prospect of shooting a western, playing a British landowner in a Canadian town where the arrival of an American gunslinger is set up as a familiar fish-out-of-water tale. Plus, the script made her laugh out loud.

"When I read the script, there were literally pages where it was like being socked in the gut because it was so brilliantly funny," Guillory says.

Gunless's writer and director Bill Phillips says there was material to be mined in writing about a western set in Canada that dealt with the American mythology of cowboys and gunslingers.

While notable westerns have been filmed in Alberta, including *Unforgiven* and *Brokeback Mountain*, Phillips says a Canadian western had branches that had not yet been explored.

"Our perception of how the west was settled is different than the perception that came from American westerns.

"At a basic level, we saw the settling of the American west as pioneers going out and taming the Wild West. In Canada, it was the Northwest Mounted Police who went out and settled things down and then told people from the east: 'Come on out.'"

Production designer Matthew Bludgeon says the set, which was a few kilometres' drive off the highway over rugged terrain, was integral to the plot line.

The town's population of 17 and the six buildings where the characters interact were built in Vancouver over two weeks and broken down into parts that could be trucked to the remote set just outside of Osoyoos.

Rebuilding the tiny border town took 16 days.

"We're 15 minutes from civilization and, when you look 360 degrees, you can see nothing of that, no towers," Bludgeon says. "That's something we didn't think we could get, because you're always dealing with at least power lines."

The set so completely replicated a small western 19th-century town that the owner of the sprawling property plans to keep it intact as an attraction for visitors.

Gunless is to be released in the spring.