

How a Canyon Diablo Meteorite Made The Silver Screen



By Jeremiah Gurzi

It all began in Reno, Nevada, during the summer of 1994. I can still vividly recall swimming with friends after hours at Idlewild pool. We would routinely show up around midnight to cool off and I would inevitably find myself laying on a diving board, staring in awe at the heavens above. That summer I was introduced to Stephen Hawking's, 'A Brief History of Time', which perpetuated a rapidly growing fascination with the cosmos and led to astronomy courses a couple years later at the University of Nevada, Reno. Unfortunately, the university didn't offer a bachelors degree in astrophysics, a fact which subsequently resulted in my transfer to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas where I studied film production. Yes, film was a considerable departure from all the mathematics, science and astronomy courses I had labored through. Nevertheless, I found myself equally as passionate about cinema as I was about the universe. I also quickly realized that the film medium would allow me to explore and develop narrative based stories around the characters, interests and themes haunting my frontal lobe. Filmmaking would soon serve as a platform to explore and research vast areas of interest while simultaneously serving as a

creative outlet to communicate and entertain audiences.

By the fall of 2002, I had relocated to Los Angeles where I began working in the motion picture industry. Within a short period of time, I was qualified to join the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees. My employment as a professional union member in Hollywood allowed me to financially supplement my passion for filmmaking while simultaneously serving as an extended education and opportunity to experiment on someone else's dime. Within my first few years of living in Los Angeles, I had worked on HBO's 'Six Feet Under', 'Big Love' and the blockbuster, 'Spider-Man 3.' My new union wages and industry resources were allowing me to make my own narrative and experimental short films, write screenplays and collaborate with other aspiring filmmakers. It was also around this time that I desperately wanted to incorporate the stars into a narrative based script for the silver screen and was determined to figure out how.

During the summer of 2006 I was seated on an airplane en route to Austin, Texas, when an in-flight magazine with an article on meteorite hunting caught my attention. The moment I began to thumb through the article I became enthralled. Meteorites represented modern day treasure hunts, wild outdoor adventures and an opportunity to help provide scientists with a glimpse into the building blocks and origins of our universe. I felt an immediate attraction to these meteorites and thought that some additional investigative detailing on these interstellar bits of debris could be my ticket to infusing the stars into a narrative length script.

Upon my return to Los Angeles I began to research and seek additional information about meteorites on the internet and at the public library. I was acquiring and consuming as much information as possible about meteorites and meteorite hunting in preparation to write an authentic meteorite hunt into my first feature length motion picture. My immediate



Actor Wyatt Denny, playing Mickey, looks for meteorites at the Trona Pinnacles Natural Nature Preserve.



Actor Wyatt Denny and Rob Tepper, playing Mickey and Jasper, navigate the open road.



Actor Wyatt Denny and Rob Tepper, playing Mickey and Jasper, listen to a Geologist classify their meteorite.



Actor Wyatt Denny, playing Mickey, inspects his counterfeit bills.

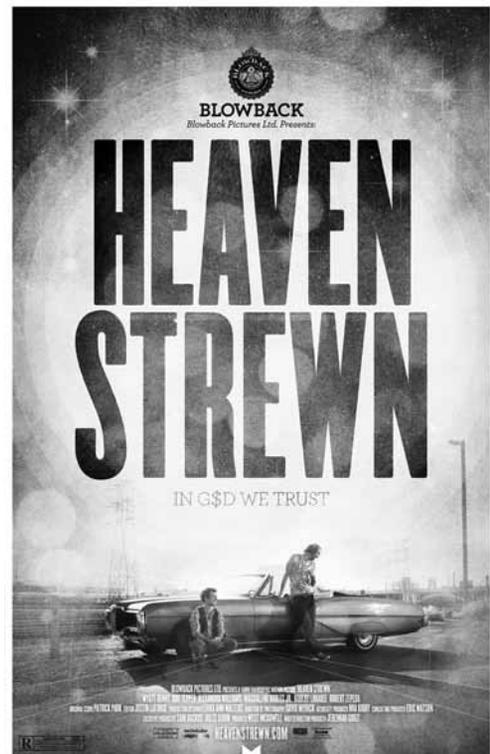


Actor Wyatt Denny and Rob Tepper playing Mickey and Jasper prepare for a photo shoot in the Los Angeles Chronicle.

concern about depicting the search for meteorites on screen was the possibility of misrepresenting a meteorite hunt, given I had never actually participated in or experienced anything like it. The believability and realism of each actor's performance on screen would be rooted in the authenticity of dialogue and action contained within the screenplay. It was too risky to jeopardize the validity of the narrative by improperly displaying the nuances of a meteorite hunt without the confidence and knowledge that the writing would play accurately. At that moment the thought of a mentor with experience in the field and a superior knowledge of the community had crossed my mind, thus signaling the entrance of Ruben Garcia AKA Mr. Meteorite. I had stumbled onto his website while conducting some research, and knew he could help shore up a few thoughts and ideas on the script if he was only willing to humor my questions. After careful deliberation, and with a click of the mouse, I had decided to introduce the project and myself to Mr. Garcia. To my surprise, he quickly responded to my correspondence in a very warm, inquisitive and enthusiastic manner. He had a number of questions about the project and about the existing meteorite resources currently at my disposal and even went on to mention some thoughts on how to enhance the authenticity of all on screen. Our ongoing conversation continued for over a year and proved invaluable to the project. Ruben provided an enormous amount of insight, went out of his way to make himself available, and eventually committed to providing production with a Canyon Diablo Meteorite he had in his personal collection. Ruben's generosity and experience in the field made him an invaluable asset to our team and contributing factor to the successful development of our independent film.

After a number of rewrites to the screenplay, we were finally in position to pre-produce the film. After a lengthy, methodic and careful pre-production phase, we were able to conduct all of the principle photography on 'Heaven Strewn' in the state of California during the summer of 2010. The story follows two lead characters as they travel to the desert in search of meteorites, or rather one lead character who is coerced under the ruse of meteorite hunting by the other lead character who provides tantalizing disinformation for personal motives divulged later in the movie. The film utilizes a meteorite hunt as a catalyst to explore and challenge the thresholds of their friendship while their experiences ultimately lead to an alternate discovery that thrusts each into immediate danger. All of our meteorite and strewn field scenes were photographed at the Trona Natural Nature Preserve just north of Mojave. The rugged terrain and majestic rock formations provided a magical backdrop to each scene and arguably played as a character within the film. The only notable caveat to shooting at the Trona Pinnacles was the temperature, which eclipsed 105 degrees Fahrenheit on multiple occasions over the course of our 9 days of principle photography in the region. The heat limited our shoot days to an average of 7 1/2 hours and I can imagine that these temperatures are equivalent to those endured by professional meteorite hunters at various geographic locales worldwide.

Upon completion of principle photography, we immediately entered the post-production phase, which took about nine months and was finalized in April of 2011. 'Heaven Strewn' premiered a week later at the 10th annual Ashland Independent Film Festival where it was one of 13 narrative films selected from over 900 entries. Almost half of the 13 films playing in Ashland had premiered at the Sundance Film Festival earlier in the year. This placed our meteorite-movie within a distinguished pedigree of work. While in Ashland, 'Heaven Strewn' received two award nominations for best acting ensemble and best feature. A very enthusiastic audience consistently greeted us during our Q&A at



The Heaven Strewn movie poster.

the end of each screening. Comments would range from the sincerity of performances by the lead characters, to whether or not metal detectors were really utilized in finding meteorites. The audience's participation and seemingly consistent enthusiasm for the film during each Q&A panel made the difficulties associated with shooting in 105-degree temperatures and having a small budget seemingly disappear.

Looking back at the evolution and development of 'Heaven Strewn,' I am extremely grateful to everyone involved. The experience of making this film and the opportunity to collaborate with so many uniquely talented individuals left an indelible impression. Making a feature length film had been a personal goal since relocating to Los Angeles in 2002. Achieving this goal with so many incredibly gifted individuals exceeded my expectations and will remain a highlight of my life.

RECENT UPDATES: 'Heaven Strewn' was most recently nominated at the 2011 Maverick Movie Awards for best screenplay, best actor and best soundtrack. The film also recently played to a vivacious audience this January at the Festivus Film Festival in Denver, Colorado. 'Heaven Strewn' is currently negotiating a distribution deal that would make it accessible to the general public via DVD, Blu-ray, digital and numerous VOD outlets.

About the Author:

Jeremiah Gurzi is an award-winning filmmaker, member of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) and founder of Blowback Pictures Ltd. Gurzi received the coveted 2010 Panavision first time filmmaker grant package and support from the Eastman Kodak Company for his directorial debut 'Heaven Strewn.' You can learn more about the movie at www.heavenstrewn.com or Follow us on Facebook & Twitter.