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Happy Days: Ad Man Ron Lazzeretti Brings “The Merry Gentleman” to Chicago

With a 26-day shooting schedule this spring, “The Merry Gentleman” brought jobs to Chicago and served as the feature directorial debut of actor Michael Keaton. It also marked another feature for independent filmmaker Ron Lazzeretti, who acts as creative development director at Draftfcb. SCREEN recently caught up with Lazzeretti to talk about the production of his latest film, his working relationship with Keaton and the balance between advertising and film work.

SCREEN: You produced “The Merry Gentleman” in Chicago this spring. How did the project first get off the ground?

Ron Lazzeretti: I was working with Tom Bastounes [for] the last two to three years. We had worked together on another little independent feature called “The Opera Lover” and we definitely wanted to up the ante this time. We took our time to get the right combination of people, particularly a leading man and leading woman that we thought would be good and that would have some credibility.

We had spoken with the people for Kelly Macdonald, an actress that we were really interested in for the female lead. We [also] knew we needed a strong male lead and Steve Jones, who’s also a producer on the film, was able to get a script to Michael Keaton’s people. I was set to fly out to Los Angeles to meet Michael about being in the movie and the day we were trying to make arrangements – a week before Christmas – I ended up in the hospital with a ruptured appendix.

The first time I talked to Michael I was lying in a hospital bed with a tube in my stomach, stoned on morphine with a 104 [degree] fever. I decided, “You know what, I have to step aside as director on this because all the stars are aligning and I don’t really want to wait another year to do it. We have to figure out another way to get it done.” We had Kelly [and] we had Michael very interested, so I didn’t really want to be thing that stopped it from getting done.

How has the production gone and how have you and Michael Keaton collaborated?

It’s been great. When I first started talking to [Michael], he would say, “Listen, if I can take this on and I’m going to [direct] this, rest up because I’m really going to need your help. You’ve been living with this a long time [and] you were ready to direct it, so stand by.”

He's definitely the director of this movie, but there's a nice team. From what I can gather, I get treated a more like a playwright than a screenwriter. You hear horror stories about people who wrote the movies and then aren't even welcome on the set. This has been a different situation and we've adapted as we went along.

I think Michael, particularly as a first-time feature director, has been very savvy and smart about using all the people that he's surrounded himself with. There's just something about the way that he works and the way he treats everybody that has made this a pleasure from beginning to end...It's been a long time since I've been on somebody else's set so it has been fascinating to watch the dynamics of it without being right in the middle of it.

You also work at Draftfcb in Chicago. How do you balance your work in advertising with your work in independent film?

It's much easier for the commercial stuff to be more [of] your bread and butter and frankly I enjoy working on the advertising side. You have a much greater opportunity to exercise your craft because it's sort of this thing that just keeps going. Sometimes with independent film you find that you're trying to get the engine started. You need money, you need time [and] you need favors.

The people I work with [at Draftfcb] are [also] really supportive of this kind of thing. I think there was a time when, if [an agency] knew you were out doing your little films, then that would be something you would almost have to keep a secret because it meant you weren't devoting 100 percent of your time and energy and brain power to the cause.

When I went off to do ["The Merry Gentleman"] I got no resistance whatsoever from them. It's been nothing but support and I think they see a value to this. They see it as one of theirs going out and doing something that has the potential to be good and interesting. They don't really see a down side to that and I don't either.