

BBC and Hands On Productions, Inc.

# WISCONSIN DEATH TRIP

## PRODUCTION NOTES

Writer/Director James Marsh's first feature, WISCONSIN DEATH TRIP, is an intimate, shocking and sometimes hilarious account of the disasters that befell one small town in Wisconsin during the final decade of the 19th century. The film is inspired by Michael Lesy's book of the same name which was first published in 1973. Lesy discovered a striking archive of black and white photographs in the town of Black River Falls dating from the 1890's and married a selection of these images to extracts from the town's newspaper from the same decade. The effect was surprising and disturbing. The town of Black River Falls seems gripped by some peculiar malaise and the weekly news is dominated by bizarre tales of madness, eccentricity and violence amongst the local population. Suicide and murder are commonplace. People in the town are haunted by ghosts, possessed by devils and terrorized by teenage outlaws and arsonists.

Like the book, the film is constructed entirely from authentic news reports from the Black River Falls' newspaper with occasional excerpts from the records of the nearby Mendota Asylum for the Insane. The film also makes use of the haunting black and white photographs taken by the resident portrait photographer of Black River Falls at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The film unfolds over four seasons and certain characters feature throughout the film as their criminal behavior lands them in the newspaper again and again. Jo Vukelich portrays Mary Sweeney, a cocaine snorting school mistress with a compulsion to smash windows, who frequently runs amok in the area. Another eccentric is Pauline L'Allemand (played by Marilyn White), a mildly famous opera singer who gets washed up in the town with no money and ends up going more and more crazy. A 13 year old boy (Marcus Monroe) murders an old man for kicks and then engages in sporadic gun battles with a pursuing posse. All the while, buildings are being torched by a bored teenage girl, a diphtheria epidemic devastates the town's infant population and all manner of strange suicides are being reported in great detail.

Presiding over the chaos of the newspaper stories and providing a linking device for the intricate screenplay is the character of the newspaper editor who is portrayed by actor Jeffrey Gordon. The stories from the newspaper are narrated by award-winning actor Ian Holm (recently seen in THE SWEET HEREAFTER). Director James Marsh notes "the newspaper was run at the time by an Englishman called Frank Cooper, so Ian was a perfect choice for us - his voice conveys an incredible range of moods - incredulity, moral indignation, sly humour - while remaining both authoritative and soothing."

BBC Arena and Cinemax presents a Hands On Production of WISCONSIN DEATH TRIP, starring Jo Vukelich, Marilyn White, Jeff Golden, Marcus Monroe, John Schneider and narration by Ian Holm. The film is written and directed by James Marsh and produced by Maureen A. Ryan. The editor is Jinx Godfrey and the director of photography is Eigil Bryld. The score includes music by John Cale, DJ Shadow and various other composers. Also starring are John Baltus, Raeleen McMillion and Krista Grambow.

The making of this film began over five years ago when Marsh happened upon an out of print copy of the book WISCONSIN DEATH TRIP by Michael Lesy. "The title immediately intrigued me. And it certainly lived up to its promise - the book is a catalogue of strange, disturbing and darkly humorous vignettes of real life tragedy, from a forgotten place and a forgotten time. As you read it, the photographs begin to resemble these weird apparitions from the past, staring right into your eyes. I wanted to convey in the film the real pathos contained in a four line newspaper report that simultaneously records and dismisses the end of someone's life.

I also sifted through hundreds of newspapers from the town as well. Certain themes began to emerge which the film was structured around - the anxieties of the time focus on suicide and madness - that is what the people of the town seem most afraid of - and if the film has an abundance of these stories, that's because the newspaper of the time reported little else. The main challenge in writing the script was to respect the chaos and randomness of the newspaper stories whilst creating themes and underlying filmic rhythms that could hold it all together."

Marsh had first taken the idea to Anthony Wall, executive producer of BBC's award-winning arts series Arena. "When James suggested the idea I thought it was ambitious and off the wall, even by our standards, but James had done some outstanding work for Arena. He had complete conviction that the idea could be turned into a film, so we all made an act of faith and went with it.

We'd co-produced James' previous film for Arena with Cinemax so we offered WISCONSIN DEATH TRIP to Sheila Nevins and Nancy Abraham to see if they wanted to co-produce it for their Reel Life series."

Producer Maureen Ryan was introduced to Marsh through their mutual friend British film director Benjamin Ross (YOUNG POISONER'S HANDBOOK) in the winter of 1997 and at that point the decision was made to create an independent coproduction with the BBC and Ryan's Hands On Productions. "When James first mentioned this project to me, I was immediately attracted to it. It was a very different film from the kind of features we were seeing on the screen at the time. His vision was so chilling and yet oddly humorous - like an Edward Gorey poem. I couldn't resist the opportunity to produce this film."

The black and white cinematography is one of the most haunting elements about the film. Marsh and director of photography Eigel Bryld spent much time discussing and experimenting with the way the film would be photographed. As Bryld recalls: "The photographs - and the challenge of replicating their look in live-action sequences - is what drew me to the project. We ended up doing some fairly unusual and reckless things whilst shooting which mercifully paid off. More than any other film I've shot, this film is completely driven by its visuals and of course, that shifts more responsibility onto the DP but is also more rewarding." Marsh notes "Before shooting, we did take a look at a lot of silent movies and one or two visually inspiring black and white films (NIGHT OF THE HUNTER, MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA, REBECCA) but our principal influence were still images from the early history of photography - notably Lewis Hine and Andre Kertez - you can learn everything you need to know about black and white composition from those two masters."

The unusual black and white cinematography caught the attention of the Digital Film Lab in Copenhagen and Philips in France who agreed to sponsor a digital blow up of the film using prototype technology. The film is thus the first black and white film to be fully mastered to 35mm using a digital process and the results were deemed very satisfactory by all concerned.

WISCONSIN DEATH TRIP was made over the course of two years by a small documentary crew working with a very tight budget. The film was shot on location in Wisconsin, in each of the four seasons, using existing historical sites across the state. All the actors in the film were recruited from open casting sessions in Wisconsin - most are non-professional and many had never acted at all before their appearance in the film. A great many scenes in the film were improvised, often in sub-zero temperatures, and so the discomfort and bewilderment shown by the actors is usually genuine - and shared by those behind the camera!

#### **ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS**

JAMES MARSH  
(Writer/Director)

After graduating from Oxford University with a degree in English, James Marsh began working as a researcher for a commercial tv station in London. He soon moved on to the BBC and began making documentaries for a maverick arts series called Arena which had a reputation for commissioning eccentric and iconoclastic films and allowing untested directors to make them. His body of work for Arena includes THE LAST SUPPER - a documentary about the last meal requests that are ordered and served to death row inmates before they are executed, THE TRIALS OF THE ANIMALS - about the forgotten practice of arresting and prosecuting animals for crimes committed against people that was prevalent throughout medieval Europe, and an account of the murder of soul singer Marvin Gaye (gunned down by his father - a fundamentalist preacher and occasional transvestite) called TROUBLEMAN. Marsh's 1996 documentary THE BURGER AND THE KING won the Royal Television Society Award for Best Arts Documentary and the Best Arts Documentary Gold Medal at the 1997 Chicago Film & Television Festival. The film was a survey of Elvis Presley's favorite meals and an account of his life through the eyes of those who cooked them for him.

Most recently, Marsh made a film with Velvet Underground founder member and solo artist John Cale which won a BAFTA in Wales. Cale returned the favor by writing the end title music for WISCONSIN DEATH TRIP. Marsh is currently at work on a feature film script inspired by a real life murder case in contemporary America.

MAUREEN A. RYAN

(Producer)

WISCONSIN DEATH TRIP is Ryan's second feature film. She produced the 1997 drama MATCHBOX CIRCUS TRAIN by director Chanan Beizer which was filmed entirely on Mackinac Island, MI. The island has a "no motorized vehicle" policy which the filmmakers did not challenge, making the 80 minute feature the first American film made entirely with bicycles and horse drawn dreys for transportation of equipment and crew. Ryan graduated with a Master of Fine Arts degree in Film from Columbia University and has since produced many different kinds of productions including award-winning documentaries, music videos, and commercials. Her work as producer of television specials include LONG LIVE THE KING: COUNTRY SALUTES ELVIS and she recently worked on the NBC special GARTH BROOKS: DOUBLE LIVE. Her documentary producer credits include THE ENTREPRENEURIAL REVOLUTION for PBS (for which she was also the field director) and SONY SPIRIT, a program that was commissioned for the 50th anniversary of Sony Corporation. She won a New England EMMY for the 1992 documentary ON THIN ICE and is now developing a television series for cable television and a documentary on American culture.

ANTHONY WALL

(Executive Producer)

Anthony Wall is the executive producer of "Arena", the BBC's flagship series of arts and culture, a role he shared for ten years with the late Nigel Finch. Together, Wall and Finch defined the special "Arena" style and profoundly influenced documentary filmmaking in Britain. Under Wall and Finch, "Arena" produced a number of international successes, including PARIS IS BURNING, made for and first shown on Arena (1990). After its theatrical release, it won an Academy Award nomination for Best Documentary. In addition, Arena productions have won six British Academy Awards (BAFTA) and twenty nominations.

Wall has also directed the award-winning films BUNUEL (1983), THE EVERLY BROTHERS (1984), SLIM GAILLARD'S CIVILIZATION (1988) and HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE MARIA (1987) an investigation into the unlikely connection between show business and Catholic religious life. He was executive producer on STONEWALL, Finch's last work and first feature film, and also I SHOT ANDY WARHOL, both developed through Arena. He is currently directing a film LOOKING FOR THE IRON CURTAIN, which records a journey down the old Iron Curtain ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Wall has personally received two British Academy Awards (BAFTA), in 1988 for Arena itself and in 1998 for THE BRIAN EPSTEIN STORY (BAFTA). He produced the BAFTA-winning SCARFE ON SCARFE (1986) and has received six further BAFTA nominations. He has received primetime and international EMMY nominations (1988+1992), two Broadcasting Press Guild Awards (1994+1995) and numerous other honors from around the world.

SHEILA NEVINS

(Executive Producer for Cinemax)

Sheila Nevins is the executive vice president for original programming for Home Box Office. She is responsible for overseeing the development and production of all documentaries and family programming for HBO and Cinemax and their multiplex channels.

During her tenure, HBO's critically acclaimed documentary and family programs have won numerous awards including seventeen Emmy Awards, thirteen George Foster Peabody Awards and seven Acadamey Awards including: PERSONALS (1998), ONE SURVIVOR REMEMBERS (1995), I AM A PROMISE (1993), EDUCATING PETER (1992), COMMON THREADS: STORIES FROM THE QUILT (1989), and YOU DON'T HAVE TO DIE (1988). The series CINEMAX REEL LIFE has featured a number of award-winning documentaries including BREATHING LESSONS: THE LIFE AND WORK OF MARK O'BRIEN which won the 1996 Academy Award for best short subject.

In 1998 she garnered two career achievement awards: the IDA Career Achievement Award and the New York Women in Film & Television Muse Award for Outstanding Vision & Achievement. Nevins holds a BA from Barnard College and an MFA from Yale University School of Drama.

EIGIL BRYLD  
(Director of Photography)

Egil Bryld has lensed several feature films in the last few years. In addition to WISCONSIN DEATH TRIP, this year he also completed POSSESSED, a Zentropa Films production for director Anders Klarlund. In 1996 he also shot THE EIGHTEENTH for the same director. That film won the Best Film prize at the Mannheim-Heidelberg Film Festival, and a Fipresci Prize (International Critics award) and the Best Film honor at the Valencia Film Festival in Spain. When not filming features, Bryld shoots commercials and documentaries for European television. He is currently in production in Sweden on the feature RIKOSCHET by director Resa Parza for Illusion Films.

JINX GODFREY  
(Editor)

Jinx Godfrey has been editing since 1992 at The Whitehouse Post Productions Ltd, in London. As well as editing numerous documentaries for BBC1, BBC2 and Channel 4, she also edits commercials and was additional editor on SPICEWORLD THE MOVIE and assembly editor on LEAVING LAS VEGAS. In 1998 she was nominated for Best Editor at BAFTA Cymru Awards for the documentary JOHN CALE, directed by James Marsh, which won Best Music Programme 1998.

ELLEN KOZAK  
(Costume Designer)

Ellen Kozak designs costumes for independent films, commercials and theater productions. She has designed for many companies across the country including the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, GeVa Theatre in Rochester, NY, the Intiman in Seattle and the Center Stage in Baltimore. Her costumes run the gamut from period African costumes, futuristic creations, Elizabethan, Victorian, and contemporary designs. If Kozak can't find the costume, she'll create it herself - out of anything. When designing the costume for the female immolation scene midway through this film, Ellen went home and stitched up the multiple copies from two matching bedspreads. Her creations were up in smoke in minutes and Scarlett O'Hara would have been proud. Kozak studied fashion design and graduated from the Maryland Institute of Art in Baltimore.

CHRISTOPHER RUSSO  
(Hair/Makeup/SFX Makeup)

Christopher Russo is a hair and makeup artist who also specializes in special effects makeup. He began his career with L'Oreal in Paris and then moved to Los Angeles to concentrate on film productions. There he studied with Vin Kehoe and Mike Westmore, the makeup designer for STAR TREK, THE NEXT GENERATION. While still in L.A., he studied theater makeup at the Pasadena Playhouse College and began working in the theater as well. Now based in Milwaukee, Russo designs makeup and special effects for the Pamiro Opera Company, the Florentine Opera Company, the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre and other smaller regional companies. He also designs for the Lyric Opera Company in Chicago and recently did the makeup for FIDELIO for the Chicago Symphony. When not busy on theatrical productions, Russo creates hair and makeup for independent films and commercials.

MICHAEL LESY  
(Book author)

Michael Lesy is an renowned author, essayist, lecturer and professor. He received his PhD in American Cultural History from Rutgers University and has been an Associate Professor at Hampshire College since 1990. His books include WISCONSIN DEATH TRIP (1973), TIME FRAMES (1980), RESCUES (1991) and VISIBLE LIGHT: THE LIVES AND ART OF FOUR PHOTOGRAPHERS (1985), for which he was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Biography. He has written for DoubleTake, Aperture, Afterimage and the New York Times. He is currently at work on his next book PICTURE US which will be published by W.W. Norton in 2002. His first book WISCONSIN DEATH TRIP is out-of-print, a situation which all hope will be temporary.

DJ SHADOW  
(Composer-partial)

DJ Shadow is widely credited as a key figure in developing the experimental instrumental hip-hop style associated with the London-based Mo'Wax label. His early singles for the label, including IN/FLUX and LOST AND FOUND (S.F.L.), were mini-masterpieces which combine elements of funk, rock, hip-hop, ambient, jazz, soul and used-bin incidentalia. Shadow's first full-length disc ENDTRODUCING was released in 1996. In 1998 he released PREEMPTIVE STRIKE, a compilation of early singles.

**ABOUT THE CAST**

IAN HOLM  
(Narrator)

Ian Holm is an award-winning actor whose work spans across all genres and media. His theater work began in 1954 at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in a production of OTHELLO. Since then he has been in over 40 plays in Europe and the U.S. He won a Tony for THE HOMECOMING in 1967 and the 1979 RTS Best Actor Award for THE LOST BOYS. In 1998 he won the Critics Circle Theatre Award and the Olivier Award for Best Actor for his work in KING LEAR. He received an Oscar nomination for his film work in CHARIOTS OF FIRE in 1982 and recently won a GENIE Award for Best Actor in the Atom Egoyan's film THE SWEET HEREAFTER. Last year he was awarded a Knighthood and earlier this year received an Honorary Doctor of Letters from the University of Sussex.

JO VUKELICH  
(Mary Sweeney)

Jo Vukelich has played roles in several plays including Mrs. Whatsit in *A WRINKLE IN TIME* by Madeleine L'Engle, Myrna in *SAVIOR OF THE UNIVERSE* by Gip Hoppe and Mother Earth in *WHERE DO YOU COME FROM, WHERE ARE YOU GOING?* produced by Chicago's Blue Ryder Theatre. Vukelich has studied with an eclectic group of people including William Greaves, Boston, Del Lewis, the San Francisco Mime Troupe and is also a graduate of the Drama Studio of London/USA. She appeared in Rob Nilsson's film *CHALK* and several other independent films. She was also a writer/performer with the Tenderloin Women's Writers Workshop and her work was included in their book, *GODDESSES WE AIN'T*.

JEFFREY GOLDEN  
(The Editor)

Jeffrey Golden is a theatre actor who also works in radio and television. On the stage he has played Max in *THE HOMECOMING*, Billy in *HOUSE OF BLUE LEAVES* and German in a Spanish production of *PEER GYNT*. For NPR he played various roles in the radio series *ETHYL & ALBERT*, and he is the voice of the Wisconsin Public Radio television station WHA-TV. He is fluent in Spanish and received his Master of Arts in Communications from University of Wisconsin at Madison.

MARILYN WHITE  
(Pauline L'Allemand)

Marilyn White studied at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music, the University of Wisconsin at Madison and Alverno College. Her roles include Anna in *THE RINK*, Spider Woman/Aurora in *SPIDER WOMAN*, Velma in *CHICAGO*, Dolly in *HELLO DOLLY* and Maria in *TWELFTH NIGHT*. She has sung in many revues including *TIN PAN ALLEY*, *SIDE BY SIDE BY SONDHEIM*, and *TINTYPES*. White has performed with many companies including Milwaukee Players, Florentine Opera Company, Milwaukee Opera Company and Sunset Playhouse. She has also been the Program Director for WYMS Public Radio and a writer and on-air host of a children's radio show.

JOHN SCHNEIDER  
(Asylum Clerk/Whispering Voice)

John Schneider has been a leading member of Theatre X, the Milwaukee-based experimental theatre, for the past twenty nine years. He is the company's resident playwright and long time artistic director. Schneider is also the lead of the John Schneider Orchestra, an eleven year old jazz ensemble which performs throughout Southern Wisconsin. He was awarded the first annual Award of Excellence from the City of Milwaukee for his contribution to the artistic life of the city. Other awards include a National Endowment for the Arts Playwriting Fellowship, a Rockefeller Foundation Playwriting Grant, an OBIE Award with Theatre X and a Pulitzer Prize nomination. His work has also been produced in the Next Wave Festival at BAM, Great Britain's American Festival and the TOGA Festival in Japan.