

## Director shows off pet zombie

*Island-raised filmmaker screens horror satire for movie industry convention in Victoria*

BY MICHAEL D. REID *Times Colonist staff*

It sounds like a cruel joke, but Andrew Currie couldn't help himself.

He asked cheeky chatterbox Billy Connolly to keep his mouth shut.

He also told the irreverent Scottish comedian to shave his head and lose that scraggly beard. Currie, 44, wasn't looking for trouble. Honest.

The Victoria-raised filmmaker was casting Connolly as the star of *Fido*, his \$10.7-million stylized satire about a boy who wouldn't be out of place in a *Lassie* movie, and his mute pet zombie in a surreal small town stuck in a 1950s time warp.

"All I would do is let him grunt, which just about killed him," laughs Currie, whose work-in-progress is being screened today for dozens of the 800 film exhibitors, distributors and producers taking part in ShowCanada, the Motion Picture Associations of Canada's 20th annual convention being held here.

Filmed last summer in the Okanagan and due for release next fall, *Fido* takes place in the perpetually sunny, Rockwellian town of Willard. It's a post-Second World War fantasy world where rotting zombies — rendered docile thanks to a domestication collar invented by a sympathetic scientist — contentedly toil as mail carriers, milkmen and gardeners.

Connolly plays *Fido*, a lovable zombie whose friendship with a lonely lad, Timmy, takes a turn for the bizarre when his collar goes on the fritz and he eats a neighbour. When Timmy's ghoul friend reverts to his flesh-eating self, mayhem ensues. Sounds like *My Dog Skip* meets *Shaun of the Dead*, no?

Currie says the film, which co-stars Carrie-Anne Moss, Dylan Baker and Tim Blake Nelson, isn't really a zombie movie.

"It's more of a social satire that comments on family relationships and happens to have zombies in it, a bit like *Shaun of the Dead*," he says, adding that visually he was influenced by the 1950 Technicolor melodramas of Douglas Sirk.

"The movie functions on different layers. At its simplest it's a parody of those boy and his dog films," explains the former Lambrick Secondary School student.

"The difference is it's set in a small town surrounded by a huge fence to keep the zombies out, so on the social satire level it's sort of about Bush's America ... the gated community. There are subtle political references."

Currie, who co-wrote *Fido* with Robert Chomiak and Dennis Heaton, creator of its original story, says he loved the juxtaposition of horror and the violence of our world, and of humour and tenderness as the family and horror genres merged. "The theme of the film is what it means to really be alive, that love is more powerful than fear. *Fido* teaches us that."

*Fido* is the third feature film produced by Anagram Pictures, the Vancouver production company co-founded by Currie, a graduate of Norman Jewison's Canadian Film Centre, Trent Carlson and Blake Corbet. It follows Currie's award-winning 2001 drama *Mile Zero* and Carlson's directorial debut, the top-grossing 2004 mockumentary *The Delicate Art of Parking*.

Currie wrote the first draft of *Fido* in 1994 and reworked it at the Canadian Film Centre. It then languished on the shelf until he dusted it off two years ago and it was optioned by Anagram.

Adhering to Anagram's creative philosophy, his partners spent a lot of time — almost a decade — on development.

Produced by Corbet and Currie's spouse, Mary Anne Waterhouse (Kingdom Hospital), Anagram's pet project is being funded by Telefilm Canada, British Columbia Film and other partners. It's being unleashed worldwide by indie major Lions Gate Films, with TVA Films (its executive director John Fulton is a longtime *Fido* fan) fetching Canadian distribution rights.

Currie scouted locations in Victoria before deciding to film in and around Kelowna, where surrounding wildfireravaged forests posed as the area housing hordes of untamed zombies.

"It had all the elements we needed — an idyllic small-town look with beautiful rolling landscapes and perfect sunny, blue skies with puffy white clouds," said Currie, who spent a year studying how to replicate that Technicolor look.

He spent three weeks at Warner Bros. studios in Los Angeles working with Ray Grabowski, colourist for the re-release of *Gone with the Wind*, and with Jan Yarbrough, colourist on Clint Eastwood's *Mystic River* and *Million Dollar Baby*.

Working with Currie and production designer Robert Gray to create the film's lush retro look, director of photography Jan Kiesser (*Beowulf and Grendel*) shot in widescreen Super 35mm and did a "digital intermediate," where film is transferred digitally to a hard drive, the colour is adjusted and the movie is transferred back to film.

That some of Hollywood's best actors embraced his script was a bonus.

Connolly has said he never thought he would play a zombie, but was drawn to its blend of humour and pathos.

"He was a dream to work with," recalls Currie, who was impressed with Connolly's performance opposite Judi Dench in *Mrs. Brown* and was convinced he could wordlessly convey emotional depth. "He really is as funny as you'd imagine, and he's a very politically and socially aware guy. He had us in stitches."

He also had high praise for Moss, the Vancouver native of *Memento* and *The Matrix* fame who came home from Los Angeles to play Timmy's glamorous mother. Moss brought her son to the movie's locations, setting the film set's family-friendly tone.

Currie even rewrote the script to accommodate Moss's pregnancy.

"She had the perfect take on the film," he says. "People are going to see a different side of her. She's so beautiful and radiant and she perfectly captures the housewife with an edge — and a handgun."

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Director Andrew Currie works with Carrie-Anne Moss on the set of *Fido*. The film depicts a quiet town where zombies, such as Billy Connolly's character, upper right, have been domesticated. Michael Courtney/Anagram Pictures

