

Of men and meat

The making of indie *My Father's Hands*

BY GEMMA FILES

Once in a while, it's worth getting out of bed at some heinously early hour just to overhear conversations like this one between two production assistants during the mid-March shooting of local writer-director David Sutherland's latest short film, *My Father's Hands*:

P.A. No. 1: This meat is dripping!

P.A. No. 2: Well, that's not unhealthy or dangerous.

P.A. No. 1: Man, it feels like — live flesh.

P.A. No. 2: (Cheerfully) That's because it is!

What they're talking about, just in case you were wondering, are the huge, hanging racks of ribs which provided decoration for the movie's primary set, an active, industrial-sized freezer somewhere in the hospitality wing of George Brown College's St. James campus.

Inside, Sutherland and company huddle behind their equipment, trying to set up a shot. Outside, meanwhile, affable producer Jen Holness explains the *raison d'être* behind their highly original — and uncomfortable — choice of location.

"The two main characters in *My Father's Hands* are an old-style butcher," she tells me, "an immigrant from the Caribbean who sees his work and his shop as everything, and his son — a first-generation new Canadian — who's just got a place with the Alvin Ailey Dance Troupe in New York and is leaving tomorrow, possibly never to return. Before he can go, however, there's a robbery in the store. The father gets shot in the hand, the son in the leg, and the robbers lock them in the freezer. So they're forced by circumstance to deal with each other, knowing they're either going to get rescued... or die."

According to Holness, she and Sutherland initially planned to "fake" the entire freezer sequence, difficult — and expensive — as that might be to pull off. Happily, however, there soon proved to be other options to choose from.

"Our designer told us that George Brown had one that they might agree to rent out. So we talked to the dean, and at first he was like, 'Well, we did have a film crew in here once, and it will never happen again...'"

Sutherland, on break, chiming in: But we tag-teamed him for a while, until he finally said, 'Yeah, OK.'"

This formidable, and blessedly professional, attitude of always being ready to go to bat for their project's best interests, along with a polite but constant refusal to take "no" for an answer, is just one of several things that keep Holness and



Producer Jen Holness and director David Sutherland

Sutherland from plunging headfirst into the independent film world's usual pitfalls. Holness, regularly employed on various "real" industry projects, brings a similar sense of control and organization to her work for Hungry Eyes Film Food, the production company that she shares with Sutherland. Sutherland, meanwhile, fills his time between movies with staff writer gigs on TV shows like *Straight Up* and *Riverdale*. And though both know the stakes, the odds and the risks of their chosen vocation, neither lets the pressure prevent them from doing exactly what they want with their time or money.

"This film represents a journey in three years, from script to screen," Holness says, "and at the end of the day, neither David nor I will ever see a penny. If we sell, the money goes straight to the actors. Meanwhile, everything's either done on deferral or donated. And the fact that Toronto's become 'Hollywood North,' by the way, does not help — just means that every time we ask for permission to shoot somewhere, people try to hold us up for a thousand bucks plus. Because if you have the money to shoot a film,

then you must be swimming in it, right?"

As Holness and Sutherland hasten to add, however, sources on both sides of the equation have been "incredibly generous." Because of his *Riverdale* connections, Sutherland was allowed to film portions of *My Father's Hands* at the same studio where the show is shot — and a good chunk of the post-production budget came out

of his prize winnings from last year's On the Fly Festival of Video Shorts, in which his entry took home the coveted Mouche D'Or.

Sutherland's stated intention — as embodied first by *My Father's Hands*, then by the feature he plans to make next year — is to bring "new spices to the cinematic palate," to present a cultural experience stringently kept absent, so far, from most of the sterile, repressed, all-Caucasian visions we, and the rest of the world, have come to expect from the typical

"Canadian" film.

"A big part of why I wanted to make this a father-and-son story," says Sutherland, "is that you so rarely see black men portrayed with any kind of vulnerability in movies or expressing any emotion other than lust or rage. What Jen and I think is that we need to get across our own sense of storytelling, our own grammar, our own syntax, which resides mainly in emotion. This myth of Canadian 'politeness' is bullshit. You gotta challenge those notions, go for the grainy, nasty close-up..."

... and, break over, get back inside the meat locker, where the cold — carefully conserved between takes — is enough to give you an instant ice-cream headache. With his eyes kept glued to the monitor half-hidden in one corner, behind a pile of organs, Sutherland gently continues to negotiate the emotion he so craves out of his half-frozen actors.

"OK, so — you knock your head against the wall, and then you take the chicken and toss it..."

"You want me to toss it or throw it?" asks Mark Taylor, who plays the son.

"Oh yeah, that's great — just throw that chicken, man. I wanna see it bounce, like a curling stone."

So there you have it. Holness, Sutherland and the Hungry Eyes crew, surrounded by the tricks of their trade:

Dripping meat, bouncing chickens, idealism and industrial-strength professionalism in action, getting nothing in return by the satisfaction of a job well done. And only in Canada, you say? Pity. ◀



Arden Bess and Mark Taylor trying to keep warm in the meat locker